

What is Government For?

BY FRED STENSON

I recently imagined what I would say if an inquisitive child asked me, “What is government for?” The answer I came up with goes this way:

“The purpose of government is to carefully and politely explain that whatever you have asked cannot be answered by whomever you have asked; to give you careful and polite directions to someone else in government, who will not be able to help you either. And so on until, eventually, you tire or lose interest, or the thing you were trying to prevent happens.”

It’s a shame to deprive the youngster of the illusion that government exists to help and protect her, and to make sure that wisdom and fairness rule the land. But this answer would better prepare her for her own path through a life of frustration with the people society elects or appoints to govern her.

But, because this is a child, the least I could do is sugar-coat the pill a little by telling it through stories. To explain the purpose of the federal government, I would tell about the time I was deputized by the Writers Union of Canada to go see an Ontario



Progressive Conservative MP in his office on Parliament Hill. “This was a long time ago when the Progressive Conservative majority under Mulroney ruled Canada.”

The child interrupts. Surely I have made a mistake. “The Conservatives governed the country? And what’s a Mulroney?”

Last thing first, I tell her that a Mulroney is a former Prime Minister who lives opulently in the United States, except for occasional visits to Canada to sue his nation or to prevent the slightest recovery from shame of the party he once ruled. “The rest is

too complicated for me.”

“Anyway, two other writers and I went to the Tory MP’s office and found a well-fed older gentleman in suspenders and a perky bow tie. He invited each of us to give our rendition of why the government should give more support to the literary arts. He sat back with his hands folded on his chest. He smiled and twiddled his thumbs, and occasionally raised his wrist to see the time on his watch.

“Seeing that we were getting nowhere and time was running out, I asked what he intended to do with our request. The answer was almost certainly that he intended to forget it immediately, but he didn’t say that. He spent the next five minutes pounding the top of an air conditioner in his window. Then he sat again and leaned forward to us with a look of great sorrow. He revealed the size of the federal debt—417 billion dollars at that time—and he told us the cost of daily interest on that amount as well. It was staggering.”

The child’s eyebrows go up. “The debt is much higher now,” she says, clever child.

“Yes, you’re right. Over 500 billion.”

“Then why does Mr. Martin say he has conquered the problem of federal indebtedness?”

“I think you better ask Mr. Martin that one. Anyway, the Ontario Tory MP spread his hands on his desk and said, ‘We can’t do anything. We can’t afford to do anything.’”

I was still smarting from the fact that the federal government had just killed VIA passenger service through Regina and Calgary, for the same reasons of poverty. If I had lived in India, I would have had rail service. But, in much wealthier Canada, we could not afford it. I said that maybe the federal government should liquidate itself, if it could no longer afford to do anything. A much smaller and cheaper apparatus could collect the taxes and pay it back out to the lenders. He thumped his desk, stood, grabbed his coat, and said it was time to go.

Next, I would tell the child about the provincial level of government. The illustrating story here would be more recent: about trying to get the provincial government to stop a residential subdivision in the beautiful country outside Waterton National Park. Already there had been a public meeting in Cardston where wonderful speeches were made about the world uniqueness of the spot, its amazing preservation to date, the fact that the marvel extends well beyond the national park where only the province can protect it. It was a lovely meeting, but the municipality charged on toward approving the subdivision anyway.

At this point, many of us leapt into what passes for action: that is, we wrote impassioned letters to those we believed had the power and interest to stop the suburb from going ahead and creating a terrible precedent. Personally, I wrote to the Premier of Alberta and to two MLAs. I told them I had grown up in the area and still paid taxes there, and then I gave my rendition of the beauty, rarity, integrity etc. of the place.

Some time later, I received a letter back from the office of the MLA elected to govern the constituency that

contained the proposed subdivision. He didn’t refer to any of my points but patiently explained why it was not within his jurisdiction to do anything. It was up to the municipal authority to accept or deny the application. He thanked me kindly for my interest.

“Then what is he for?” asked the perceptive child.

“Apparently, he is for telling me that it’s not his responsibility, even though it’s his constituency.”

The beautiful sweep of country that halos out from the mountain corner containing Waterton happens to straddle a constituency boundary, so I wrote a letter to another MLA, the one who governs the other side of the line from the subdivision.

“I bet I know what he said!” said the excited child. “He said it wasn’t up to him because it wasn’t his constituency!”

“Good for you! Other writers of letters received similar responses. One mentioned the words heritage and books in her letter, so the helpful politician in that case sent her letter on to the minister in charge of heritage and books, who responded in perplexity that he couldn’t imagine why anyone would think he would be responsible. Others were rerouted to the Environment department and the Treasury Board and the person in charge of provincial gambling.”

“What about the municipal level of government, then?” asks the child, showing the first signs of a more typically adult frustration. “Why do they want to wreck the pretty area in the first place?”

“Because they will have more taxpayers and taxes.”

“But then, won’t they try to put a city there? So they can have a whole lot more taxpayers and taxes?”

“Very likely.”

“They must be stopped!” shrieked the poor child, greatly alarmed.

“Yes,” I said, wishing this task of education had fallen to some other. “Yes indeed. But by whom?”

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