

Job for the Government?

By George L. Rusby

The question whether the government should establish a Federal Bureau of Fine Arts is being debated with much heat in the popular press. Advocates of the proposal, pointing to the national theatres of some European countries as precedents, hold that the encouragement of the theatre, painting, sculpture and music may properly be assumed by the government. Opponents cite a variety of objections: Sight is being lost of the real issue in the controversy: is the operation of a Bureau of Fine Arts a proper function for the Federal government?

A & B discuss the merits of Prohibition. A contends that Prohibition is desirable and supports his contention with what seems to him a good reason; B opposes with a counter reason as to why Prohibition is bad. And after an interminable exchange of opposing views, A & B stop, exactly where they began. Why? For the same reason that nearly all discussions are similarly futile and useless—there is no pre-agreement on a premise as a starting point, no agreement on a basic principle by which to test to correctness of any view held. It is not possible to add up two columns of opposing opinions, subtract, and arrive at a convincing difference. Without agreement in advance as to a basic principle, a discussion nearly always becomes merely a talk fest—a valueless hodgepodge of superficial opinions.

Where and how shall we find a basic principle by which to test the propriety of any and every activity of government, actual or proposed? In seeking such a principle, let us begin at the beginning, deciding, first, what the proper purpose of government should be; then selecting the principle, or rule of action to be followed by law-makers in advancing that purpose; and, finally, discovering the functions necessary for government to perform in applying the principle. If, in this procedure, we

adhere to sound reasoning, we shall emerge from the realm of vague opinion and feel secure in the knowledge that our conclusions can be satisfactorily demonstrated.

(1)—What is the proper purpose of organizing government? I think it safe to take for granted that there will be general, if not universal, agreement that the only proper purpose of government is to promote the general welfare of the community.

(2)—What is the principle, or rule of action, by which government can best advance this purpose? In answering this inquiry let us first marshal and enumerate all possible principles from among which a choice must be made. This it is entirely possible to do with accuracy—the same accuracy as that with which we declare that “a thing is equivalent to the sum of all of its parts.” For the avowed aim of government cannot but be, on the one hand, to maintain the greatest possible degree of equality of individual liberty among its citizens, or, on the other hand, to maintain more or less inequality. It is obvious that any departure from equality must constitute a corresponding inequality. The three principles from among which a choice is necessary, are:

a—governmental action shall be limited to insuring that, as nearly as possible, everyone shall have opportunity to do as he will up to the point of infringing the equal opportunity of another;

b—the same as “a,” excepting that government may depart therefrom, within certain limits prescribed by the government;

c—government shall be clothed with unlimited power over the individuals comprising the governed. Subjecting the above to examina-

tion we find: “c” is abhorrent, and unacceptable; “b” constitutes a complete self-contradiction—as will become at once apparent if we attempt to specify wherein and to what extent a governing body shall be authorized to deviate from the standard set in “a.” It is like stating that seven times seven always equals forty-nine, excepting that it sometimes doesn't.

Therefore in the pursuit of the purpose of government (to promote the general welfare), we are forced, willy nilly to adopt “a” as the principle to which government shall adhere in all of its activities and law-making.

(3)—If, then, the only proper purpose of government is to promote the general welfare, and if the only principle, or rule of action, in accord with this purpose is to insure that, so far as possible, every citizen shall have opportunity to do as he will up to the point of infringing the equal liberty of another, the next question to present itself is, what functions does government have, what must it do, in order to apply this principle?

There may be a third, but to the writer it is inconceivable that these functions exceed two in number: first, government must exercise the police power (in its various forms), preventing one from infringing on the person or property of another; and, second, must maintain equality of economic opportunity among all.

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At first thought it might seem as though it would be impossible to reduce the activities of government to such simplicity—impossible to have government abandon so many of the things it now undertakes—things which we are so accustomed to seeing the government do. But just as one step in a wrong performance necessitates two more to support it, so, every time government departs from its two simple functions, a condition is created which demands a further and further departure, until we find ourselves in our present precarious and threatening situation, where step is following step in increasingly rapid succession toward



the fate which is inevitable unless the direction of our course is reversed.

Of these two proper functions of government, the exercise of the police power promptly appeals to practically all of us as quite logical, and its propriety would be contested by few. But as to the other governmental function, that of maintaining equality of economic opportunity, this is not so easy of comprehension and acceptance, undoubtedly due to the fact that there is such a meagre knowledge of basic economic principles.

Equality of economic opportunity can be secured only by creating a condition of "more jobs than men,"

using that word "job" to include all of the activities of Capital and Labor. And this condition can be attained only by government collecting all ground rent, and thus making it unprofitable to hold any natural resources (land) out of use.

So, while the answer to the question, which prompted this contribution remains specifically unanswered, a specific answer is not required. The most convincing way to answer the question "do the inhabitants of the inaccessible African jungle live by eating food?", would be to demonstrate that all men live by eating food. Furnished with a clear con-

ception of the proper purpose of government, the only practical principle by which government can attain the purpose, and the two necessary functions of government in applying the principle, it takes but a moment's reflection not only to decide the question in the negative, but promptly to decide, negatively or affirmatively, any other question that may arise involving the propriety or impropriety of governmental action. If a proposition stands the test, if it be found in accord with the above presentation, yes!—if not, no! We should never lose sight of the significance of these five words—"the universality of a principle."