

## HOW DEEP IS THE LEVEL OF DISTRUST IN GOVERNMENT JUSTIFIED?

Some of us living in countries with a history of limited government and citizen participation in civic affairs are losing faith in our institutions. Everywhere we look there is disrespect for the rule of law and for the lawmakers charged with protecting the public interest. We are left to inquire how this could have happened. Were the flaws in our socio-political arrangements and institutions always present, or have certain factions gained control over nearly all that matters. The answer seems to be that both factors are at play.

What an objective study of history reveals is the almost continuous expansion of privilege in every society after the point where the members decided to (or were forced to) settle in one place. At that point decisions had to be made about how access to land and natural resources would be allocated. These were lesser concerns when groups migrated with the seasons in search of food supplies.

With settlement, the hunter-protector groups evolved into warrior-aggressor elites with their own cultural norms. Knowledge-bearers evolved into priest crafts, claiming an ability to communicate with the gods. The rest of the people were charged with producing the goods and providing the services demanded by the two top groups in this hierarchical structure. Not many generations came and went before those who ruled began to claim they did so as the earthly delegate of a conscious creator.

There were few effective challenges to the new hierarchy, although history is filled with the tales of peasant uprisings. Philosophers, as far back as Socrates and Aristotle, questioned these arrangements, but their insights only found influence when rediscovered during the Renaissance centuries, the same period during which money and markets began to dissolve the system of mutual obligation characteristic of feudalism. A rentier elite then acquired expanding political and economic power in every society. Power and privilege for the few expanded, and these tools were utilized in the establishment of a rule of law designed to sanction and affirm claims of private property in what had once been recognized as the commons.

Any who challenged the status quo were dealt with, one way or another. Under such conditions, how could any thinking person trust the intent or actions of those charged with societal governance? And yet, many did, and many fought and died in inter-societal warfare to defend the very hierarchical structure that was the source of lives of poverty, misery, and abuse.

During the centuries of monarchy-driven nation-state building, the hunger for more power and control over more territory brought on numerous shocks to the system. Political and moral

philosophers began to question the right to rule of those who governed unjustly. Landed aristocracies began to demand and fight for limits to monarchical power. By the seventeenth century, propertied elites were for all practical purposes effectively in control. Landed wealth expanded into the realms of commercial agriculture, finance, insurance, shipping, manufacturing and the law.

The peasants and urban workers trying to somehow survive under conditions where they enjoyed little, if any, protections under law had only one real hope – migration to those sparsely-settled parts of the globe where access to land was still open to them. Ship upon ship filled with passengers made their way to the Western Hemisphere. Tentative settlements grew into villages, villages into towns, and towns into cities. Here, for the first time in many centuries, people enjoyed a temporary reprieve from the age-old hierarchical regimes. However, rather than learning from their own experiences and from history, within just a few generations hierarchical power and privilege found new homes.

We who live in the United States of America celebrate the success of the war for independence from British rule. We celebrate the beginnings of this republic, the rule of law under a written constitution, and the introduction of a government subject to change by vote of a broad electorate. We acknowledge that all was not right. Neither people of color, women nor the tribal peoples who occupied this part of the Americas were included. A high degree of religious freedom was embraced, but the struggle for freedom from religion continues. As Thomas Jefferson warned, as soon as the war for independence ended, the new system of government would experience the stress of faction. To profit by speculation in land, if possible, rather than producing goods or providing services others needed and wanted, found its way into the DNA of the new “American System”. We became a society in which gaming the system was for a long period not even thought of as an ethical dilemma.

Today in the United States, the myth of representative government is revealed everyday. Corporate lobbyists and those with great personal wealth dictate to our legislators the form of law, regulation and public policies within which we must navigate our lives. Political scientists use the term “disjointed incrementalism” to describe this reality. What is clear to me is the distance we have to travel before we can feel secure that the future will be more just than the present or the past. Equally troubling is that too few of us understand what is wrong and how we got to this point.