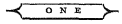


B I G D E M O C R A C Y



Government Is Different

It is EXCEEDINGLY DIFFICULT clearly to identify the factors which make government different from every other activity in society. Yet this difference is a fact and I believe it to be so big a difference that the dissimilarity between government and all other forms of social action is greater than any dissimilarity among those other forms themselves. Without a willingness to recognize this fact, no one can even begin to discuss public affairs to any good profit or serious purpose.

Analysis of Differences

Some of the less important of these differences are generally acknowledged and accepted. For example, the public recognizes without much thought or question that a good lawyer will not necessarily make a good judge. Dmly, except by those who have paid special attention to the matter, it is seen that the function of a judge, even though it has to do with law, is very different from the function of a lawyer. Attorneys treat specific situations in terms of the interests of their clients except only for the making of necessary adjustments to legal, ethical, and public-relations considerations. To have a society made up entirely of persons thinking like lawyers and clients, no matter how well intentioned, would be plainly impractical if not impossible. We must also have persons thinking and acting like judges. Yet many of us fail to recognize the need of having persons thinking and acting like government officials. To elevate an excellent lawyer to the bench will not guarantee society even a tolerably good judge. It should be equally patent that men with excellent records in private business will not necessarily make competent government officials.

In both cases, particularly in the lower brackets, there is through self-selection a certain automatic correction that limits the number of major errors in appointments. Many lawyers are not attracted to

the bench. Their disinterest usually reflects some missing qualification. Should an opportunity for appointment to a very high court be offered, there would be some tendency for the thought of honor and prestige to outweigh other considerations. But, in general, individual tastes and interests furnish material evidence of qualification and play a positive role in the process of selection. So in the choosing of government personnel. In ordinary periods many persons have little inclination to enter government, while others are strongly attracted to it. These inclinations and disinclinations are significant, and sometimes controlling, factors in the determination of the general result. In extraordinary times, however, new factors such as patriotism, desire for adventure, or other considerations may come into play and cause proportionately a far greater number of people to aspire to positions in the public service. Many of these persons will, by reason of temperament, outlook, and experience, be utterly unqualified for government work. Others will be qualified only to advise, in government they are technicians—experts in specific non-governmental enterprises. By and large, those who do not normally and consistently feel a great interest in government will not be good prospects. In general, the more they have succeeded in non-governmental fields, the more they have developed interests and habits of thought that will unfit them for government. Obviously the more delicate and difficult distinctions have to do with upper-bracket positions. There, surely, patriotism, zeal, and intelligence could never be enough—any more than they could be accepted as adequate criteria in selecting candidates for the bench from the ranks of the bar, or in selecting army generals from non-military ranks.

Admittedly there are many positions in government in which persons may function very much as they would outside of government. This is true chiefly in such lower-bracket jobs as those of charwomen, elevator operators, messengers, clerks, and typists. Yet even with respect to these there are countless instances where the employee works for the government because he definitely prefers public employment and where that preference has served the public interest. The public would be gratified and moved if it could know of them. Some day it will. For, sooner or later, regard for self-interest, coupled with a sense of justice, will cause the public to be concerned far beyond

what it is today over contemptuous attitudes toward lowly government "clerks" and bureaucrats.

Government is not different, however, simply in respect of personnel. The temperament and attitude of a judge do not furnish a complete basis for understanding the character and functioning of our judicial system. Courts are not simply assemblages of judges. Neither are they simply a succession of judicial procedures. Both of these and something over are required to make a judicial *system*. Hence the importance of popular attitudes regarding what is expected in and from a judge. All these things together, expressed in individually well-selected judges, are essential to an effective judiciary. So it is with government in general. It, too, is a *system*, and the system cannot be understood except in terms of the public employees themselves, their conceptions of their positions, and the attitudes of the public about what is required in and from our civil servants. These elements together are what make government a *system*, for in combination they comprise what we call a *bureaucracy*.

The qualifications for judges differ from those for other governmental people because their functions differ. Yet these qualifications may be used to illustrate a fundamental distinction between governmental and non-governmental tasks. In common speech reference is made to the "judicial temperament." One might similarly refer to the governmental temperament. But temperament seems to me to be less satisfactory as a common denominator than attitude. Consequently I shall speak of the "governmental attitude."

Significance of Attitudes

In my judgment no one can serve the public as it should be served by a governmental official unless he has a public-interest attitude with certain special characteristics. The carrying on of government involves action. No matter how many studies may be required, government in the final analysis is action—organized action. Persons in high positions must have a sense of action. They must have a feeling of the need for decisions to get things done. They must be able to organize resources whether of personnel, material, or information so that contemplation of objectives will be translated into accomplishment.

What has been said with reference to action is familiar to the field of business no less than government. I have, one might say, portrayed the executive, particularly the big business executive. But what I have said up to this point is, of itself, no more adequate to make a governmental administrator than knowledge of the law alone is adequate qualification for a judge. Even possessed of patriotism and zeal, the most capable business executive in the country might be a most dismal failure in government. Indeed, in actual fact many such persons do fail in government. The press, however, ordinarily treats them with such special favor, and their prestige generally is so great, that the public rarely learns of their failure. Strangely enough, their actual induction into government is often political rather than the opposite, as is commonly supposed. Frequently they are appointed to official positions as a means for securing additional support for governmental action. Or they are sought for their prestige, which, since government has the job of maintaining and developing political unity, is always a factor for legitimate consideration.

This feeling for action and this ability to organize resources for action do, of course, resemble corresponding talents that are essential for non-governmental executives. There are business executives who can serve government well, and vice versa. But just as there are successful business executives who could not do well in government, so it is true that some governmental executives who are able to administer public affairs with distinction would probably fail if transferred to private enterprise.

It is instructive to observe that big businessmen who have inherited large business interests seem, on the average, to be better bets for government service than those of the self-made variety. This is probably the result of the development of a special attitude of public responsibility inculcated by parents who were especially conscientious or concerned about what inherited wealth might do to their children. It may derive, too, from some special stimulation to self-questioning and reflection forced by their station of privilege on especially responsible young people. Or it may be the result of their being able or, for that matter, obliged to deal with their affairs more generally—that is, with less concentration on the ordinary objective of managing things with an eye to monthly earnings and profits.

Many businessmen, especially those of the self-made variety, have the disadvantage for government service of being *prima donnas*, with strong personalities too little adjustable to situations other than the ones they have come to dominate. This is true also, to be sure, of some types of vivid politicians who are effective as spokesmen but unable to function as administrators. It seems to be true both of businessmen and politicians that the spread of their activity—their participation in more than one field, and preferably in many more than one—has something to do with their ability to *manage* governmental organizations. Politicians inevitably rub up against more considerations, they tend to be more broadly stimulated. Thus any man of political inclinations who has had organizational and executive experience would be a superior prospect for success as a public official for the reason that he would, almost inevitably, have developed breadth of view and a public-interest attitude.

How Business Looks at Government

It may be unfortunate, but it is nevertheless a fact that, because of factors beyond its control, no industry can realize its own social aspirations. It is also true that no industry can regard public interest equally with industrial interest. That cannot be its function; it must have a different and narrower one. Governments exist precisely for the reason that there is a need to have special persons in society charged with the function of promoting and protecting the public interest.

People tend to develop a sense of responsibility with respect to the functions for which officially they are responsible. Ordinary people brought into government tend to develop some special degree of public responsibility. Yet there are wide ranges of differences in this respect, as everyone knows. Long concentration on other functions unfits a great many people for governmental service. I have seen scores of businessmen in government who were not able to sense the differences between government and business. Without being venal, some thought their positions in government simply a fortunate special privilege, like being the cousin of a purchasing agent. Others again had the fixed idea that the best possible way of promoting the public welfare would be to help private business and assumed

accordingly that doing favors for private business was their simple governmental duty.

Business itself, however, does not feel that way in its general attitude toward government. In all things other than those that make for its own profit, a business concern expects government to be guided by a public-interest point of view. The brevity of cabled news sometimes makes such things clearer than does the lengthier reporting of news at home. Consider, for example, this dispatch in the Paris edition of the *New York Herald-Tribune* for the year 1934:

U. S. INVESTMENT BANKERS ENDORSE
ROOSEVELT POLICY

White Sulphur Springs, W. Va., Oct. 31.—The Convention of the Investment Bankers Association, meeting here, offered today its full assistance to President Roosevelt in his recovery program.

A resolution was passed in which it was stated that the members of the association would stand behind the President *in all measures which were not calculated to infringe on their own interests*. The bankers offered Roosevelt their *whole-hearted support in particular in all his efforts on their behalf*.

The italics are mine.

Since most governmental actions affect other persons more than they do us as individuals, we all wish governmental action to be what it needs to be with respect to others, while yet, of course, being considerate of us. The truly governmental official in a democracy comes in the course of time to appreciate this. Under the impact of popular demands and lamentations he comes to realize that he must try to operate in a governmental way; that is, through action which is as fair as possible, and as uniform as possible, and which can be taken publicly and publicly explained.

Essential Character of Government

In broad terms the governmental function and attitude have at least three complementary aspects that go to differentiate government from all other institutions and activities: breadth of scope, impact, and consideration, public accountability, political character. No non-governmental institution has the breadth of government.

Nothing the national government does in New England can be separated from what it does in New Mexico. Other enterprises may ignore factors remotely related to their central purposes but not the government of the United States, it is supported, tolerated, or evicted on the basis of a balance involving the sum total of everything in the nation. No other institution is so publicly accountable. No action taken or contemplated by the government of a democracy is immune to public debate, scrutiny, or investigation. No other enterprise has such equal appeal or concern for everyone, is so equally dependent on everyone, or deals so vitally with those psychological intangibles which reflect popular economic needs and social aspirations. Other institutions, admittedly, are not free from politics, but government is politics.

Government administration differs from all other administrative work to a degree not even faintly realized outside, by virtue of its public nature, the way in which it is subject to public scrutiny and public outcry. An administrator coming into government is struck at once, and continually thereafter, by the press and public interest in every detail of his life, personality, and conduct. This interest often runs to details of administrative action that in private business would never be of concern other than inside the organization. Each employee hired, each one demoted, transferred, or discharged, every efficiency rating, every assignment of responsibility, each change in administrative structure, each conversation, each letter, has to be thought about in terms of possible public agitation, investigation, or judgment. Everything has to be considered in terms of what any employee anywhere may make of it, for any employee may be building a file of things that could be made publicly embarrassing. Any employee who later may be discharged is a potentially powerful enemy, for he can reach the press and Congress with whatever charges his knothole perspective may have invited. Charges of wrongdoing on the part of a government official are always news, no matter who makes the charge, for every former employee is regarded as a source of authoritative and inside information.

In private business the same employee would be discredited by the very fact of having been discharged. Government employees

number far less than non-government employees, but the cases of discharged government workers getting into the public prints with denunciations of their former chiefs must be at least a thousand times more frequent. A person discharged is always offended. But whereas a person discharged from a private job is of little interest to the press, the dismissal of a person from a public job is regarded as public business.

This is not to say that I would have it otherwise. I am simply calling attention to it as a fact that greatly differentiates government from business. But the public would do well in judging such reports to consider them in perspective with similar, unwarped situations in non-governmental fields.

Because of these circumstances, every governmental executive lives and moves and has his being in the presence of public dynamite. Every action he may take is influenced by this condition—whether before or after an explosion.

Millions of dollars are spent every year in government because of this situation—millions that would not have to be spent in private organizations. In a narrow sense government tends therefore to be less efficient because of its public nature. But since government operates more in the public interest because of such special attention and scrutiny, the net effect is to make it more efficient in terms of its central purpose.

As an illustration of the way in which disgruntled or dismissed employees cause expenditures of millions of dollars a year, let me cite the case of a man whom I have never seen, but whose activities I had occasion to follow for a full decade. During this entire period (and also for ten years preceding it) he carried on a continuous series of campaigns against a half-dozen of the ablest executives in the government. He talked ad hominem and ad infinitum to writers of gossip columns. He wrote to the Director of the Bureau of the Budget, to other administrative officials, and to members of the Congress. He made hundreds of charges of misconduct, not one of which was warranted. Each one, however, had to be carefully investigated and duly reported. His superiors were reluctant to discharge him for communicating with members of Congress because to do so would perhaps have convinced hostile Congressmen of the

truth of the charges. He cost the government hundreds of times more than his salary, and he stayed on the job until he reached retirement age.

The public nature of the government's business thus makes for a great difference in organizational discipline. Government employees often discuss their work with others in a way that would cause immediate discharge were they on the payroll of a private organization. Press and public both expect and induce that kind of talk. Business executives coming into government with no experience to prepare them for such a situation often find it extremely hard to adjust themselves to it. Yet some adjustment is an absolute necessity.

Generally the bigger a corporation, the more complex it is. An outsider can easily get lost in any of its fields of operations—raw materials, marketing, production, labor relations, finance, and management. Yet in relation to the United States government even the very largest corporation is small and simple. And the more big corporations we have, the more complex must the government become. Government, dealing in one way or another with almost everything, requires in its highest officials a special competence in handling relationships among all the varied and powerful forces, activities, and elements in the country. At the top the job is that of managing relationships between the complex parts of the entire nation, of giving both form and leadership to the life of the whole people. At that level it is an art—the art of politics. Only a politician can be President. The President needs economic understanding, but he should not function as an economist; he needs legal understanding, but he should not function as a lawyer; he needs business understanding, but he should not function as a businessman; he needs social understanding, but he should not function as a sociologist; he needs understanding of research, but he should not function as a scientist; he needs understanding of agriculture, labor, finance, but he should not function as a farmer, laborer, or banker. He needs to understand these *broadly* in order to understand politics: his success or failure as President depends on how he functions as a politician. At its best, politics is statesmanship.

Statecraft—government—is different from all other professions because it is broader than anything else in the field of action. Purely

speculative thought and emotion may range a wide field, yet even this may be doubted, for government must be concerned with intellectual and emotional outreachings too. Government is different because it must take account of all the desires, needs, actions, thoughts, and sentiments of 140,000,000 people. Government is different because government is politics.