



Column - James Hallmark:

Government - what it really is and what it really does

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It is trendy to criticize government. We grow angry when "they" do not do as we want, yet we want "them" to bail us out of our problems and rescue us during crisis.



Panhandle Twenty/20 recently hosted a conversation among community leaders titled "Talking About Government." It was a most enlightening dialogue, one that pointed Panhandle Twenty/20 toward a goal: facilitating a broader conversation of what "government" is, what its purpose is, and what it can accomplish.

In focus groups conducted by The Demos Center for the Public Sector, Americans described "government" as "big, inefficient, bureaucratic, corrupt, confusing, crooked, wasteful, invasive, gridlocked and polarized."

Among the Demos Center's findings: Sixty-four percent of Americans "feel distant and disconnected from government," and the same percentage thinks government creates more problems than it solves; 63 percent believe government only serves special interests; 57 percent think "government-run" means inefficient and wasteful.

These perceptions are neither accurate nor functional.

First, most government employees are efficient, hard-working and honest, and go the extra mile to help.

Yes, some are deadbeats, but no more so than employees on my own campus, at local retail stores or at your place of business. Most government employees are industrious and conscientious, just like you and me.

In fact, they are you and me. They are people, with families and bills, and soccer practices, and all the ups and downs of life that you and I deal with. That upon becoming a government employee an individual becomes slothful, incompetent and corrupt is simply a myth.

But more important than being wrong, this belief that "government" is bad is not functional. It is counterproductive to the very ideals that made us the greatest country in the history of the world.

"Government" - our government, you and me - created "public structures." It is these public structures that facilitate an environment where business thrives, entrepreneurs push the limits, scientists invent, goods get to market, and consumers spend in a safe manner.

What are public structures?

The Framework Institute classifies these structures as "physical," such as highways, airports and communication grids; "organizational," such as the postal system and the courts; and "social," such as the health and well-being of our people and communities.

The cost of doing business in a country without these public structures is prohibitive. The communication infrastructure is inadequate. The legal system won't protect you or your products. The transportation system

inhibits your ability to distribute your goods. Your employees are not sufficiently healthy to work at the level and length that we do in America.

Public structures work together to make us great, and they do not happen by accident. They are a function and a direct product of government. They are what government "does."

Furthermore, in America, when it doesn't work - when these public structures fail us - we are shocked and demand correction.

Who corrects these failures? We do, through our government.

I personally was caught in this year's passport debacle. It was horribly frustrating and inexcusable. The passport application process in America this year has been a failure of a government structure.

But what separates us from countries without functioning public structures is that we do not shrug our collective shoulders and say, "oh, well." Instead, we address the problems and usually we fix them. Our government - you and me, through our public structures - does not allow problems to become accepted practice.

We address innumerable problems through our public structures. We may debate about how that public structure can best support the public good. But there is never debate as to whether the public structure should exist.

For example, when was the last time you found someone who thought we would be better off without roads?

Airports?

Hospitals?

When was your last conversation about whether the existence of the communication infrastructure was a good thing?

Did it occur on your cell phone, or was it by e-mail?

Who among you think government - fire and police, FEMA and local authorities - should not have responded when Tulia and Cactus were hit by tornadoes?

How these structures are managed is a matter of great debate, but that we would be better off without them is never part of the conversation. It is because we know our lives are enriched by these public structures.

These public structures are what government does. Government "is" the people. It is you and me.

Government "does" structures that enable us to function individually as people and collectively as a society.

Panhandle Twenty/20 will be continuing this conversation, and examining how we can talk about government in a manner that helps us as a community.

We hope you will join us in these conversations, but more importantly, we hope you will be part of the solution.

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