

The forgotten role of government

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'...a State which dwarfs its men...will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished.'

- John Stuart Mill

The proper role, composition and functioning of the state has preoccupied scholars from the time of Plato right down to the present day.

Understandably, the establishment of order was often highlighted as the primary task of government. It is no different today when protecting citizens from the threat of terrorism, influenza, climate change and economic uncertainty are so central.

But history suggests that what truly motivates people goes beyond the establishment of security. The United States was famously immortalised by Francis Scott Key as 'the land of the free' - not 'the land of the safe'.

People, in all places and at all times, have been prepared to risk it all, in order to be free. We do not just live our lives - as animals do - we lead them. And we do not always take kindly to those who, for whatever benevolent reasons, seek to impose their model of how life should be.

Of course, in a democracy, those politicians who may wish to assert such views are, ultimately, held accountable by the people. But neither they, nor the officials they task with implementing their visions, can ever afford to take this role lightly. The real art of leadership is to ensure that others follow.

Accordingly, winning hearts and minds is as important in the domestic arena as it is in resolving conflicts elsewhere. But it is increasingly evident that for the vast majority of people, the assurance that government is keeping them safe may not be enough to keep them on-side. People look for meaning to life, not just more of it.

The forgotten role of government today is to inspire people, not simply to protect them. In an age marked by the absence of belief in secular ideals, nothing could be more vital. People who believe in a cause or project are far more effective agents of it than those who are coerced or corralled. But to benefit from this power of conviction, there needs to be a concomitant intellectual or ideological engagement that is often absent today.

No state can hope to command and control every action and interaction of its citizens. To do so would lead to paralysis. Indeed, those countries that tried to do so in the last century collapsed from within, as people withdrew their energies and enthusiasms from the projects they were supposed to be supporting. Nothing is guaranteed to accelerate cynicism faster than being told what to do while remaining disengaged.

In fact, in almost all societies today, individuals increasingly encounter each other as free and autonomous agents. They enter into contracts - of employment, of exchange and of marriage - not at the point of a gun, but largely through choice, irrespective of the limitations of their circumstances.

It is precisely these freely-willed and freely-entered-into social relations that oil the complex relations of nations. But individuals need to have a sense of their own potential, as well as that of society, through the prism of having had their imaginations captivated or inspired towards achieving particular goals.

Unfortunately, such goals for society today are most notable by their absence. At the time of the Enlightenment of the 18th century - that period which generated the sense of ourselves as free, equal and autonomous agents - there was little need to spell out the need for inspiration. The tremendous changes and upheavals that occurred then were inspiration enough. They led a young William Wordsworth to write: 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive. But to be young was very heaven!'

Today, however, in a more quiescent period - one not marked primarily by the removal of kings or concerted challenges to the domination of religious dogma - there may be a need to be more conscious about the need to inspire the citizenry. Ours has been cited as an age of anxiety, but where are the ideas and ideals capable of leading us beyond our narrow existential concern for our own well-being and towards a broader appreciation of the potential of the collective human project?

A recent editorial in this newspaper managed to capture the requisite spirit. Reflecting on the demise of the US-led space race on the 40th anniversary of the moon landings, it argued, 'Given America's dithering, it behooves many Asian countries to replicate the spirit of 1969', before concluding that, far from being a diversion of resources, such adventures exemplified the human spirit and could galvanise a nation.

The choice, so often invoked in our risk-averse times, between freedom and security is a false one. Real security can emerge only from being free and not the other way around. Sadly, today the maxim 'better safe than sorry' seems to dominate over that of 'nothing ventured, nothing gained'. It remains to be seen whether the future will be captured by those who would instil absolute safety first or those who understand the need to inspire a nation in order to achieve great things.

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