

## Our Changing Economy

# Big Needs Build Big Government

By Philip Stoddard Brown

IF GOVERNMENT, like clothes, is a badge of innocence, we have come a long way from that natural gate about which political philosophers and poets used to dream.

Today we have lots of government and lots of clothes. To be sure, some who have most clothes wear few and some who enjoy most public protection and privilege are loud in advocacy of less government.

But none of us really want to live ungoverned in a big city, innocently trusting our fellow men. We can't individually inspect the kitchens of restaurants where we eat, or the scales of grocery stores. We can't supervise the chemical sprays that farmers use, or the additives of manufacturers.



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## More and More Government

If government is the badge of lost innocence, urban living is the principal cause. We want lots of police, fire and health protection. We want parks, playgrounds, filtration plants and public transit—things that a rural population doesn't need.

Between 1942 and 1957, personal income in the United States increased 184 per cent. The expenditures of State and local governments increased 339 per cent. Even so, salary scales of teachers and other municipal employees are generally inadequate and many public buildings are antiquated.

The decision "to live thick," in a great urban community, necessarily requires a lot of government-run business and a lot of government regulation of private business. Washington, with 3 million residents will require a more-than-proportionate increase in government.

## Social Needs Most Urgent

The fact is that more and more of our needs are social. We want more and better schools, parks, recreation centers, a clean Potomac River, a stadium, filtration plants, new reservoirs, roads, bridges, a public transit system, redevelopment of slum areas, a great exhibition hall and a cultural center. All these require public funds and the extensive exercise of public powers. Subsidies and franchises can't be handed out and forgotten; government has to be a virtual partner and has to look after its partnership interest.

Most big corporations get along well enough without stockholders bestirring themselves. But this isn't the case with local governments. Taxpayers must attend meetings, write letters and vote. This takes time and isn't fun. That's why the fulfillment of social needs is more difficult than making television sets or baking bread.

## Government by a Clique, for a Clique

Let a local government go unattended by its owners and soon it is run by a clique, for a clique. Jobs and contracts come to be a family affair. The planning commission becomes a local real estate board, and the courts a collection agency for local stores and loan companies.

Left to themselves, local authorities may do all right in catching petty thieves, but may give away zoning rights worth tens of thousands of dollars. They may cause a small sign to be removed, but waive a regulation and permit a huge ugly neon tower to dominate a whole community. It's the old story: "The law doth punish man or woman that steals the goose from off the Common, but lets the greater felon loose that steals the Common from the goose."

Residential interests may get little consideration. Some groups may be ignored. On the entire payroll of Alexandria, there aren't half a dozen Negroes above the status of laborers. With two or three exceptions they aren't even hired to drive trucks. Despite the difficulty in recruiting qualified policemen, there isn't a single Negro officer. As one official remarked, "We're scraping the bottom of the barrel for white persons, when educated Negroes with officer training in the armed forces are available."

A local government can be far more privately run than the Ford Motor Co., which has to contend with a fiercely independent labor union and with customers equally independent.

## Innocents at Home

The old notion that business and government are separate spheres is naive. The distinction between government and private business fades as cities grow. Many private firms in Washington have one customer—the government. In a sense, they are more public than some government corporations. Some private firms exercise a lot of what amounts to government authority, from which people have little or no appeal.

There is no easy dividing line. Some of the biggest private firms, such as insurance companies and savings and loan associations, have no stockholders; the only real supervisor over management is exercised by government. Before long, many stock companies will be owned by pension funds and this may necessitate more government supervision.

People should realize how much protection and how many public services they want. They had better abandon their poor-relation attitude about local government. In Alexandria, responsible public officials are given less office space than the lowliest clerk in many businesses.

## Government Is Business, Too

Local government is a business that needs superb management in a big city or large suburban area. It is more complex and involves more difficult decisions than running a clothing store or auto dealership. Yet the salaries paid to city managers are generally lower.

We are served by government bodies and private firms. We can be regimented by both, or—if we manage well—we can enjoy a lot of liberty.

Government, like clothes, can protect us; it can satisfy physical needs and aesthetic desires. Or, it can be a source of special privilege and a rigid censor—just as clothes can be a symbol of status and also a badge of prudery.