
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”
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The Functions of State Government

p. 747

The daily lives of the average citizens of 1930 are said by statisticians to be at least five times more varied and complicated than those of their parents in the civilization of half a century ago. Probably the same ratio of complication and variety holds good in regard to business and industry and the professions. It is certainly true of science. If these figures are correct, they must apply with at least equal force to the whole field of education, for after all, education is not merely a training for the complications of modern life, but is also very definitely a reflection of the demands of modern life.

What then of the comparison between the Government of today and the Government of our Fathers' day? If in the activities of the lives of individuals and of association of individuals the increase has been five-fold, it would not be surprising if the tasks of Government had increased even more greatly, for the Government represents not a single profession or a single art or a single science, but rather a cross section of all activities of man. I venture, therefore, the assertion that if one may use a rough yard stick, the activities of Government today are at least ten times more numerous than

fifty years ago. The yard stick must not be one of mere dollars and cents, for it is obvious that activities of Government can be increased enormously in the mere size of the individual activity without adding new activities. Take, however, the comparison, for instance, of what the Government of the State of New York was doing in 1880, and compare it with what the State is doing at the present time, and you will find that our Fathers were living in an era of extraordinary governmental simplicity.

The reason that I speak today on the theme of the functions of Government is because you of the younger generation, who are about to enter into active life, find yourselves of necessity facing a distinct problem during the next few years. You have heard the general theory that the Government which governs least is the Government which governs best, and at the same time you have seen and are seeing a constant demand, more insistent with every passing year, that Government, Federal, State and Local branch out into every kind of new activities; that it extend its functions to cover the whole range of human endeavor.

Let me take as a concrete example the functions of State Government in caring for the social welfare of the people of the State. In 1880 this State of ours was concerned with practically only two functions of this nature. First, the incarceration of criminals, and secondly the care for some of the mentally deranged persons within our borders. In the first case, the care of prisoners was still in the most elementary form. It was confined to keeping criminals locked away behind bars in steel cells, making no differentiation between the various types of prisoners, providing no work or occupation or education for them, and treating the problem of the wrongdoer solely from the point of view of punishment for crimes committed. In the case of the insane, medical science of 50 years ago had made few strides and psychiatry was unknown—a man or a woman was either insane or not—and, if insane the State placed them in asylums from which practically none ever emerged. In a third function of social welfare, that of education, the State in those days did little more than to carry out a minor system of inspections, and the local educational units bore practically all the responsibility and the cost.

What have we today? In the case of the prisons we are in the midst of initiating the most far-reaching forms in the history of modern civilization. We have reached the conclusion that the prisoner is an individual and must be segregated as to type and on the basis of mentality, background, environment and cause of crime. Furthermore, we are beginning dimly to understand that both from the viewpoint of humanitarianism and of economies the State has not merely a duty to punish, but an even higher duty to see to it that the criminal, when released, shall not return to criminal ways and again become a charge upon the State. This means that this function of the State has become a complicated administrative science, demanding many types of institutions, many types of occupational teaching, and a complete system for checking the history of the individual and seeing that he is given every human opportunity to go straight upon his release. The creation of the new State Parole Board next month is a step of far-reaching consequence.

By the same token the science of mental hygiene has progressed to the point where our hospitals for the insane can no longer be asylums, but must aid to return an increasingly large percentage of the mentally-deranged to normal life, with a complete history of cure.

Finally in these past fifty years the State has undertaken a great number of additional social activities, such, for instance, as the care and instruction of the deaf, the teaching of the blind, the maintenance of a great institution for our tubercular cases, another great institution for the treatment of cancer and kindred diseases, and also a hospital and home for crippled children. There still remain two other functions. One is covered by a series of hospitals and schools for the mentally deficient as distinguished from the insane. Here the State is caring for thousands of children who, in popular language, would be called morons, and we are accomplishing great things in educating them to be sufficiently normal to go out into the communities and lead useful individual lives. In this same category we can place the correctional institutions for the young, where anti-social tendencies are being taken in hand

sufficiently early to bring about a very high percentage of complete cures. Finally the State has embarked this past year on the beginning of the Relief of Old Age Want. I say advisedly the beginning, for within the next few years this must of necessity, expand into one of our major functions.

There are other matters which, perhaps, should fall under the category of social welfare, all of them undertaken in our own generation; for instance, the organization of the State Police, a splendid body concerned not merely with the detection of crime, but with other activities which are of immense value to welfare conditions, especially in the rural sections of the State. Then there are the series of laws affecting labor, such as the Workmen's Compensation Law, the careful system of factory inspection, the limitation of hours of work of women and children. So also there is the State Department of Health, practically non-existent fifty years ago, but now however, of very great importance in the guaranteeing of pure food, pure milk, proper sanitation in every community, and the prevention and spread of epidemics of every kind. Just in this past year the State has undertaken the improvement of the great State-Owned Springs at Saratoga with the purpose of making them the greatest health resort in all the world. Last, but not least, your Government in Albany is spending well over one hundred million dollars a year for education in every part of the State, where fifty years ago it spent but two or three million. These illustrations covering only one of the functions of the State, that relating to the broad subject of social welfare, are sufficient to prove the difference that has taken place in Government as a whole.

We of today ask for the intelligent interest of the younger generation in answering the question, "How far shall this extension of function go?" There would seem to be two ways of giving the answer. The first is to proceed as we have proceeded during the past generation, adding new functions year by year as the occasion arises, but without any definite plan or policy, allowing the answer to come either from political expediency or from a sometimes ill-considered popular demand. If we continue this process, there is the definite and distinct danger that the functions of the State Government will multiply so rapidly, that some morning we shall wake to find the purse empty, or in other words the burden of taxation increased to the breaking point.

The other procedure, and the one to which I invoke your help is the building up of such a careful and intelligent study, such an active interest on the part of the population as a whole, that we shall be able as a sovereign people to lay down an orderly procedure, to outline a structure of Government limited definitely to functions which are admittedly the right functions of Government, and eliminating all the others which belong properly to private enterprise. More and more we tend to admit to the class of proper governmental functions those which can best be conducted by Government rather than by private enterprise, especially those functions which in greater part can be made self-sustaining. That is not Socialism. It is not Socialism for the United States Government to conduct the mails of the country, it is not socialistic for cities to own and operate their own water supplies or even their own utilities. The test is in the ability of Government to conduct these enterprises as well as or better than private enterprise, and in an increasing number of communities that test is being met.

Many are border line cases and it is for the younger generation, especially, to make the decision and to establish the principles, and to set forth the policy. On you the responsibility lies.

I rejoice in the reports which come from almost every university in the land, that interest in the study of Government is on the upward trend, among faculty and students alike. To the institutions of higher education throughout the land we must look for liberal thought and the willingness to have a hand in the functioning of Government.