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Drift to world government?

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What level of government (local, state, federal, multinational institution or none) should regulate the following: What trees you may cut on your home property; whether you may burn logs in your home fireplace; what identification you need to open a bank account in your local bank?

Traditionally, it was not considered anyone else's business, including the government's, as to what trees, flowers and other plants one grew on one's own property. Slowly, local governments and zoning authorities began regulating these decisions. As the influence of agricultural and environmental interests grew, federal laws and regulations were passed regarding which crops and trees could be grown or removed from private property.

Until roughly a century ago, every home had a fireplace, used for heat and often for cooking. The idea of restricting the burning of wood in a fireplace would have been seen as both ludicrous and unacceptable. As heating technology improved, fireplaces evolved from necessities to desirable options, and cities became more and more plagued with smog, local restrictions began appearing on burning in fireplaces.

These restrictions have been moving from the local to regional and even state levels. If the advocates of the Kyoto Treaty have their way, such limitations may move to the federal and even international level. (The Kyoto advocates have yet to figure out what to do about the occasional volcano that can toss more pollutants in a matter of days than all the power plants and fireplaces on the planet combined in a year.)

When I was a child, no identification was required to open a bank account, and almost every school kid in America had a passbook savings account.

Today, you need extensive documentation to open a bank account because of both the U.S. and internationally mandated "know your customer" regulations. We should be asking why Americans and citizens of other countries are forced to meet the requirements of unelected bureaucrats in an international organization (the Financial Action Task Force or FATF in this case), which has the effect of making it very difficult for students and other innocent people to get bank accounts. (FATF will claim it only gives recommendations; but if banks and countries don't follow those, FATF threatens to "black list" them, making difficult the conducting of necessary corresponding banking relationships.)

Over the last 80 years, we have seen the endless drift of government power from local, to state and regional to the federal and now increasingly to multinational institutions that have become quasi-governments fulfilling some government functions, particularly on trade, financial, environmental regulation and even criminal justice, given the advent of the International Criminal Court. The drift toward global statism has continued at a relentless but measured pace; so, like the frog in the pot, we don't realize we are being boiled to death.

As an example of this trend, in 1952, Illinois Gov. Adlai E. Stevenson was the nominee of the Democratic Party for president to run against General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Stevenson was considered the liberal or statist in the race.

Yet, according to the recollections of the leftist economist, John Kenneth Galbraith (as reported in Richard Parker's new Galbraith biography), Stevenson opposed "federal funding of public housing." He also said, "Schools were for states and localities to worry about, and federal aid to education should be considered only as a last resort." In addition he "opposed Truman's health proposals as socialized medicine." Today, a half-century later, such views would put Stevenson to the right of the Republican Party.

There is too little discussion, not only about the proper functions of government but about what level of government is appropriate for each agreed upon governmental activity. In the 1996 presidential campaign, Sen. Robert Dole tried to engage in a serious discussion of the issue by saying he intended to renew the commitment to the Tenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people."

The citizens of Europe are now having a healthy debate, as part of the ratification process of their proposed constitution, about what level of government is appropriate for what activity. Despite this debate, the EU continues to assert extraterritorial coverage for some of its laws (as does the U.S.), and both the U.S. and the EU, and most other countries, continue ceding sovereignty to multinational institutions like the U.N. and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

These institutions now demand that American taxpayers pay more in foreign aid, even though Americans are the most generous givers in the world.

The American Founding Fathers understood that government works best when it is closest to the people. Many American small towns had direct democracy in the form of the town meeting. The Swiss still have direct democracy as they have had for centuries, and it has worked very well.

As government gets more distant from the people, it is more likely fundamental individual rights will be trampled, and the individual will feel he has less power. We should not let ourselves just drift into supernational statism but, instead, have a genuine debate about what powers may and may not be delegated to each level of government, including those of multinational organizations.

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