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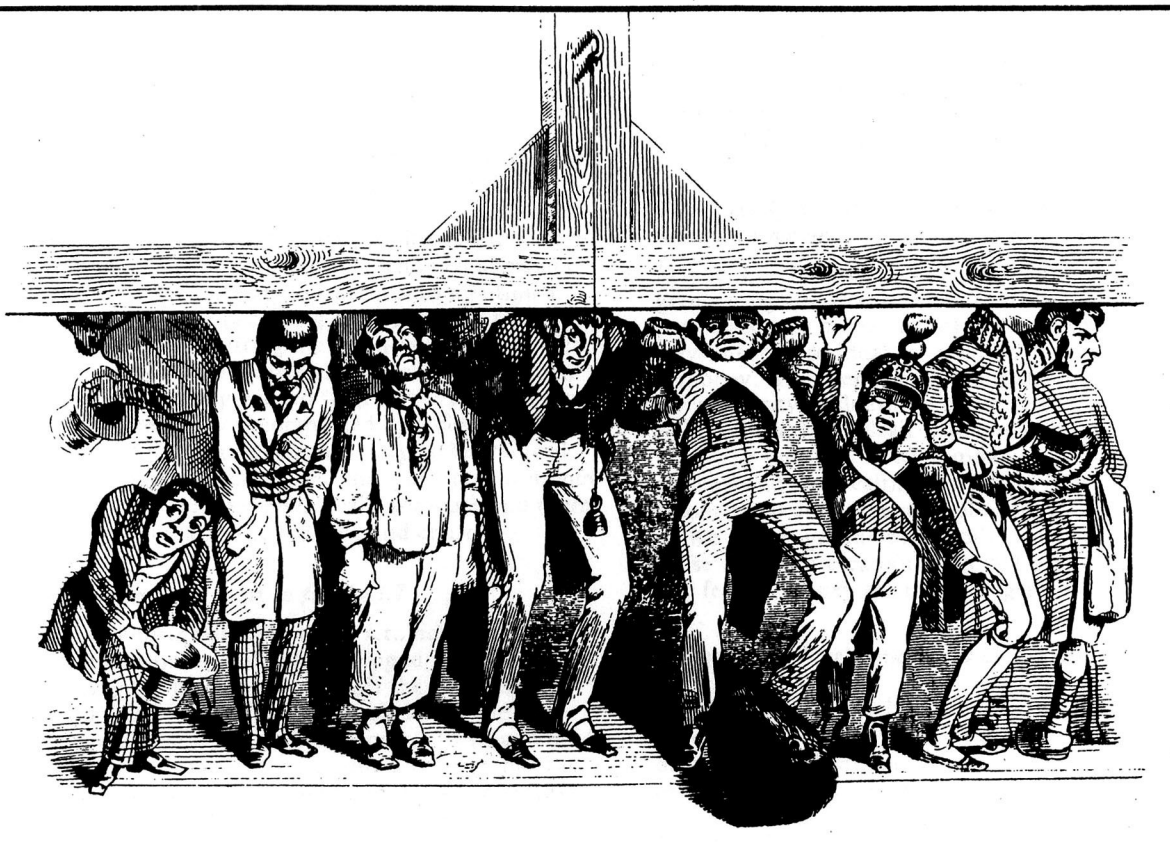
Is there an inherent contradiction in the involvement of large and centralized government in the development of small-scale and locally controlled technology? Ideologically the answer to the question of government involvement in a.t. is a thundering "Stay Out!" Choosing to do decentralized things in a centralized way belies that you understand at all what you're trying to accomplish.

Pragmatically the question is not so simple. Universal, generalized answers are one of the things that we've learned are rather unworthy of trust.

The federal government does exist. We can't pinch ourselves and make it go away. It has some value. It also has subsidized and encouraged the exploitation of America as well as the rest of the world by our corporations, and has been the leader in the bureaucratization, regulation and institutionalization of our lives. Any real rebalancing of power between central and local institutions and individuals must involve the Feds, probably as an adversary. You can't be *given* power, for the power to give is the power to take away. And institutions, like people, don't usually like to give up power.



BETTER DEAD THAN FED?

—Tom Bender

How can we tell if the Feds are serious about a.t.?

You can tell when anyone gets serious about something—when they start looking at their own actions in relation to it. If the Feds get serious about a.t., they won't be funding solar water heaters. They'll be trying to figure out what *should* and *should not* be done locally or centrally or by people themselves. They'll be looking at what *needs* to happen at the Federal level and what *should* be done, better or worse, locally. They'll be asking how to decentralize, simplify, close down and turn over many governmental activities to state and local control. They will be dealing with anti-trust, corporate monopoly, control of corporations, elimination of advertising, and elimination of subsidies to large-scale activities. They will be examining the relative effectiveness of self-reliant and centralized technology, self-reliant and exchange economies—*but* as a means to decide what to keep hands off of rather than as new government program possibilities.

Sounds like these things ought to be looked at anyhow.

Yep. Our government has been operating on what we would call *Evasion Politics*—avoiding dealing with any real problems that might rock the vote-boat. It's called hiding symptoms rather than dealing with causes. The government voice is the last voice you'll hear raising real questions about equity of wealth, foreign intervention, poverty, dangers of nuclear radiation, failure in Vietnam or depletion of energy supplies. The data is there, the questions need to be dealt with, and we need to keep them clearly and squarely in front of our government.

Do you really believe they would ever support anything that radical or critical or revealing?

They? They who? Our government may be a mastodon, but it isn't a monolith. With anything that big, the left hand never knows what the right hand is doing, and it's not impossible

that there are a few good, questioning people who can make some good things happen. Getting them implemented is another story, and that involves getting the word out and the pressure back in. And you can be sure there will be problems with suppressing reports, mudslinging, and most every other kind of opposition.

What about government funding for a.t.?

What about it?

Is it necessary?

Probably not. It seems clear that appropriate technologies are being developed and applied rapidly on local and regional levels without government funding—winterization, solar heating, self-help housing, food production and distribution, community-controlled businesses and services, and neighborhood and community-controlled finance structures to mention a few. People and groups are becoming more aware of the resources they lack, and are getting the business skills, technical advice, tax knowledge, legal understanding, political acumen and cooperation and sharing needed to generate viable new projects. This is increasingly accompanied by a clear and articulate awareness that our problems must largely be resolved by local responsibility and action, and that government money is not free dollars but only our own local hard work and taxes diluted 5 to 1 with bureaucratic red tape and control.

Why does the government want to fund a.t.?

Mostly it neither knows nor cares about a.t., nor knows it's funding it. A few dauntless individuals slipped in a couple of paragraphs among the billions that roll off the congressional typewriter, and pried loose a few peanut shells for the monkeys to fight over. Mostly they were curious as to what would happen. And the government likes to fund anything that has votes or glamour or can get it off the hook. It likes panaceas, too. Paranoid people say the Feds are just trying to give a.t. enough rope to hang itself.

How much rope are they letting out?

So far about $20 million to the AID program, maybe $5 million to NCAT, and about $3 million through DOE.

What's happening to it all?

Mostly the usual—it's making the rounds among the bureaucrats, consultants and academics. A little dribbles out into real projects.

What's the score so far with all that money?

The $25 million to AID and NCAT is mostly down the tube. The $.5 million spent by DOE so far and some of the NCAT grant money has a pretty fair chance at producing some good. That's about a 2 percent success rate, if you wondered.

That's really not much money for the whole country. Shouldn't we be putting more money into a.t. things?

Maybe. Lee Johnson said, in his review of the DOE/California grants program, that there were a lot more excellent grant proposals than money allocated. But remember, there are always more good ideas for spending our tax money than there is money. And even if all the outstanding projects should be given priority, it doesn't mean that government money is the right answer. If we dealt with any of the real problems, like removing subsidies to oil companies, transportation, sewer systems and the wealthy, we'd have both the incentives and resources to develop and implement a.t. things locally.

We always get the best results with our own money, because we're more careful with it. Local money is second best, and federal money the most dangerous.

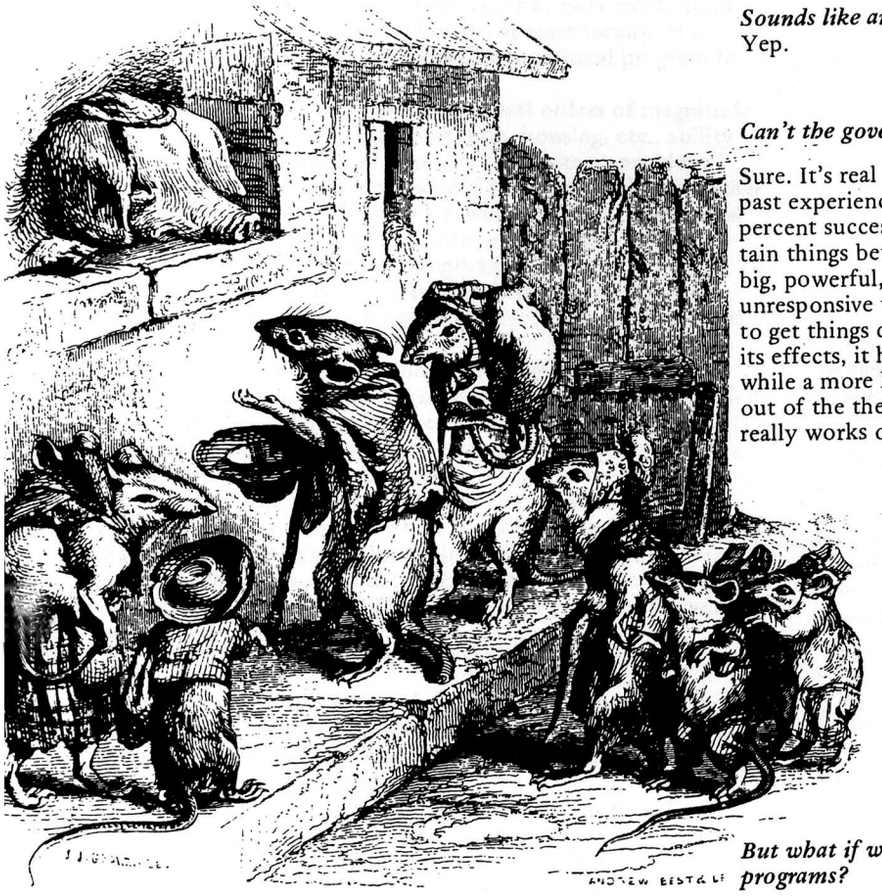
Dangerous? What's dangerous about government money?

Well, first of all, it isn't theirs—it's *ours*. That's the first danger. Secondly, it's addictive—the experience seems to indicate that projects started with government money have a real hard time getting the self-discipline to get onto a self-supporting basis. It's so much easier to go back for more F$, and it makes the Feds feel they're performing a service and filling a real need. Thirdly, government money is expensive—the time, money and effort spent hustling it, preparing reports and more reports, dealing with delays, and meeting ever greater regulations on how, who, what and which side's up could usually do the project itself if not aimed at the government free lunch. Fourthly, there is no incentive to succeed or produce anything real. Even more important, depending on the government makes us lose our ability to do things ourselves, and lose a lot of important self-confidence along with it. We sit around and say—"Well, if I had a grant . . ." instead of going ahead and doing what we're talking.

Well, if the government subsidizes big business and has paid for development of jet airplanes, nuclear reactors and various other things, shouldn't there be an equal subsidy to a.t. to get it developed and give it a fair chance to compete?

A lot of people suggest that, and it may be easier initially. But the easiest path is not necessarily the right path to take. Subsidies lay false economies around a development, deforming it into unreal forms, while increasing the public confusion as to the real relative merits of things. Solar subsidies mean encouragement of expensive active systems rather than cheaper passive ones. Giving more and more subsidies instead of removing the existing ones only moves competition from the field of economics into that of politics—who has the power

to get the larger subsidy? Guess who would likely win? Subsidies seem to require performance standards, which seem inevitably to be based on engineering efficiency rather than cost effectiveness, which pushes things back into the hands of the corporations. Subsidy can provide encouragement, but there are other ways, such as putting solar collectors on the White House and a garden out back.



What other hazards are there to government assistance to a.t.?

Organizational effectiveness, for one. People like Barry Stein, in *Size, Efficiency and Community Enterprise*, have shown the great diseconomies of scale that exist in large organizations which make them less effective and desirable than smaller ones. These "diseconomies" are not limited to dollars alone. The larger scale of federal programs results in a focus on "fiscal accountability"—whether the money was actually spent, not on its results or on possible more effective alternative expenditures. It results in focus on management skills rather than ability to understand and respond to local realities. The scale of programs results in too much information to be digested by decision-makers—they can't keep up with the details necessary for successful programs. The scale of operation forces decision-makers to design programs, not select effective people. Spending deadlines, fiscal years, and refunding demands lead to strangely aberrant behaviors—such as putting *any* program together to get rid of end-of-year funds, overrevving programs to get "results" quick enough to get refunded, etc. Goals, programs, budgets, personnel, and operations all too frequently become pawns in power plays among managerial staffs of the bureaucracies.

Then there's what's called the Sucked-In Hazard. It's what happened to environmentalists during Carter's campaign. All the major environmentalists were let know that they were being considered for an Important Job in the new administration. Didn't hear much criticism of Carter's nuclear position from any of them, did you? The government's big enough that it could give every critic an Important and Well Paying Job without making a dent in the government, but effectively absorbing and neutralizing any momentum for change.

Sounds like any big operation.
Yep.

Can't the government do anything effectively?

Sure. It's real good at growing. It *can* do some things well. But past experience says it doesn't very often. (Remember the 2 percent success rate on a.t. money so far?) It can also do certain things better than others. It's kind of like a steamroller—big, powerful, slow to get going, hard to change direction, unresponsive to local situations, but good when you're trying to get things done alike everywhere. Because of the scale of its effects, it hesitates (hopefully) to act until overcertain, while a more local action (like the Oregon Bottle Bill) can get out of the theoretical realm and find out whether something really works or not.

But what if we got the right people in to run the government programs?

They'd probably do some good, but probably be destroyed in the process. The amount of power and opportunity to do good (or bad) in any centralized operation makes almost everyone who gets the chance work themselves to death. It's called the executive syndrome. Marriages fall apart. People start to smoke cigarettes again. They get old fast. Egos get big enough that they start to bump into things. Things get out of balance. It's not a fair thing to do to people. We've seen it happen to enough friends to know, and it's hard enough to slow down our own lives to a good balance! We need to break that opportunity down into small enough hunks that a person can do good with it and still be able to stay human.

Besides operational effectiveness, what other drawbacks are there to Federal activities?

There are a lot of things government can't do or isn't supposed to do. It can't give good evaluation of government programs or recommend one product or group, etc., as better or worse than others unless it really covers its own tail. It's not supposed to lobby. It has great difficulty taking risks or opposing governmental domination of relationships. Governments, like any large organization, have an inherent affinity to other systems of similar scale and organization. It's easier

for the Feds to solicit and administer one large contract than ten small ones, but it would be easier and cheaper for ten states to administer one small contract each.

Government programs have great difficulty making effective use of existing local resources. Thus considerable rationale exists for handling many activities from a regional rather than a national level. Many regional networks already exist, know local problems, resources and how to operate locally. It is much more difficult and expensive for a national program to deal with local problems.

Regional networks can operate several orders of magnitude more effectively—cheap transportation, housing, etc., ability to focus existing resources into new responses to problems (pulling already funded local people and organizations together to divert existing energies into a.t. work), ability to gain local support and funding. Regional networking kinds of organization can give all members a strengthened and truer sense of their ability, worth, importance and values—none are indispensible, all can initiate things, and make contacts themselves directly.

In any national organization or program set up from the top down, the tendency is for smaller scale elements (i.e., us) to exist at the pleasure of the center. Organization developed from local bases can allow the power base to remain with local groups—any regional or national activity then exists at their pleasure and can be changed or eliminated by the local groups. A top-down organization tends to centralize activities that occur at different scales while locally based structures, such as federations, tend the opposite direction. Cooperative efforts need to occur at different scales—the question is where the control lies.

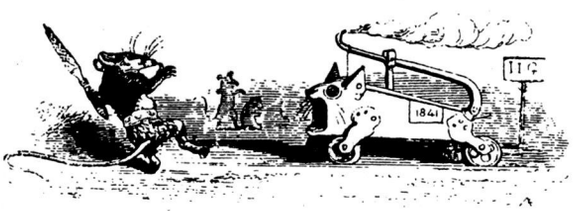
Perhaps the greatest drawback is forgetting that there are usually several ways to successfully achieve a goal—with each having secondary effects which are very different yet equally as important as the primary goal.

Government programs also suffer a particular malady of logic common to large-scale projects. There is a contagious illusion of reality and effectiveness in planning multi-million dollar programs—planning perfectly logical structures by adding or taking away hundreds of thousands of dollars without any sense of the realities behind the dollars or the situation.

Logic deals only with *internal* consistency. It gives no sense of whether the program fits or can adapt to the realities of where and when and by whom it is to be applied to what context. There seems to be an inherent assumption that if a problem exists, can be defined, and a logical governmental program developed to deal with it, that such is the desirable way to go, although the direct and indirect effects of state, local, individual or no action may frequently be preferable but unexamined.

Don't locally funded small-scale projects have any problems?

You bet they do. Lack of expertise, frequent failure to deal with problems on a *large* enough scale, local politics, lack of funds, to mention a few. But their score on all the human, economic, and effectiveness levels seems to be better overall than large-scale activities, with the exception of a few areas where national coordination is essential. And it's a lot easier for people to live with their own shortcomings than with someone else's shoved down their throat.



So what is the answer to the question we started with—Is government assistance to a.t. desirable?

There is no answer.

Many small-scale processes that will require no subsidy in their actual operation may require a vast amount of work in development, shakedown, and dealing with the politics and hassles of conversion from larger systems. Often that work benefits us all, but its effort may destroy small projects or burn out individuals who have to do it on their own. Assistance may help. Toughing it through may be better. Each case is individual. Sometimes it's justified to play Robin Hood and take some from the big rich system for the poor small ones. Depends if you're good enough not to get burned. But Robin Hoods depend on having that big rich system.

Diversity and redundancy of approaches are vitally important. Government alone has little. Local projects have a lot. The two together may have more. Or less.

It depends upon our particular situations, needs and abilities whether it's more strengthening or more debilitating to go it alone. It also depends on the trend of things. There is no single point where too much government funding or participation is too much—but there is some point where it has gone too far, destroyed too much local initiative, where too much responsibility has again been given up to the government.

Small scale, localized technology can either evolve into a decentralized form of a centrally controlled society or into a decentrally controlled one. They are totally different things. The demonstrated viability and desirability of one or the other in a thousand of small situations will decide which. It's up to each of us. ■

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