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Rethinking Government in Maine

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Commentary: Rethinking government in Maine

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In virtually all segments of society we are re-thinking and re-designing our institutions and traditional approaches to decision-making. In the 1980s, many American businesses were forced to do this as a result of having to compete in a global economy. In the 1990s, faced with complex social problems and inadequate resources, we are re-engineering concepts of leadership, public organizations, educational institutions, and government. How well are we doing in Maine?

Answering this question starts with an understanding that "reinventing government" is about philosophical change. The philosophy does not have to be new; we may re-discover such political philosophies as Jefferson's popular sovereignty, for example, and adapt them to the demands of the 21st century. But, we know that business-as-usual approaches and incremental changes are unlikely to restore the public's confidence in government. Rather, reinventing and re-engineering should respond to four fundamental transformations. Such transformations are being demanded by reform movements across the country, are driving forces behind electoral outcomes, and are consistently supported by public opinion research.

First, similar with our experience in the private sector, reinvented governments will be smaller. In part, this is mandated by fiscal conditions—we cannot afford to do as many things with public revenues. Equally important, however, is the recognition that larger size is no longer associated with strength or stability. Rather, the larger our institutions, the less responsive and flexible they become.

Second, reinvented governments will be performance based. The burden of proof is on government to show that its programs and services are effective and responsive to the needs of citizens. This obvious point is frequently lost in our rush toward public accountability, which requires that we justify our programs and services by whatever means possible. So, we often measure accountability by inputs rather than results—it is easy to find data on money spent, cases managed, people served, programs created, or bridges under repair. None of these sources measure how well government is doing or whether people are satisfied with the results.

Third, twenty-first century governments will be less intrusive. The growth of government at all levels from 1950 through the 1980s reflected both the fiscal capacity to fund government and public pressures for governments' increased involvement in problem-solving. Both causes no longer exist. Instead, twenty-first century governments will move away from command and control philosophies and toward partnerships. They will need to "steer rather than row" (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992), be catalytic not controlling, and be partners not managers.

Fourth, twenty-first century governments will need to be flexible and creative. While there are cases where uniform standards are appropriate, reinvented governments will increasingly move away from one-size-fits-all approaches and toward adaptability in policy implementation. Two excellent examples which are working in numerous states are the use of market incentives in the

regulatory process, and the use of competitive, trial-and-error systems, including privatization (National Governors' Association, 1993). Such systems recognize that we have few pre-determined models to choose from. Effective, customer-oriented government will require innovation and experimentation to find solutions that work best in given settings.

Changing old traditions is a hazardous business. Nobody likes doing it. Even after breaking the world's record, Dick Fosbury's high jumping method, the "Fosbury Flop," was rejected for six years by the U.S. Olympic Committee; it was just too new and radical. Today, all world class jumpers use it. Similarly, efforts to reinvent government will face strong resistance. However, the conditions and characteristics in Maine are right. The independence of the Maine voter, decline of political party influence and the election of an independent governor, facing and surviving the economic crisis of the past five years, and passage of term limits are all conditions which favor breaking the mold in public affairs.

It is premature to do a report card on either the King administration or this legislative session. However, the first six months since the 1994 elections are on the right track to recreating Jefferson's popular sovereignty— by moving towards responsive, smart, fast, flexible and catalytic approaches to governance. In at least three of the four indicators of transformational government—smaller, performance-based, and less intrusive—progress is being made. Multiple approaches have been initiated to make state government smaller, better, and more responsive, including recent downsizing initiatives for both the executive and legislative branches. Performance-based approaches are being implemented, including performance-based contracting and benchmarking for economic development. Less intrusive approaches to government, a central theme of the King administration and several legislators, is most noticeable in the Governor's agenda for regulatory reform.

The test of such initiatives will lie in how well they are implemented and sustained. The key is that they represent real approaches to better governance and they are responsive to the demands of the electorate.

Steve Ballard

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