



# THE VIEW

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## GOVERNMENT AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR: WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

BY  
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Is it really we versus them?

Much has been written during this deep and drawn out recession about the relative positions of the private sector and the public sector in their respective fights to survive intact. As one might expect, the tone of these discussions seems to portray business and the private sector in general as the unfortunate victim of this whole economic debacle and government as one of the chief perpetrators. In short, this can be viewed as the classic “zero sum” game, where if government wins it is because business loses, or vice versa, if business gains strength it must be at the expense of government. At best, government is discussed as a separate component from us the citizens and the elements of free enterprise that are at the roots of all of our livelihoods. All too often, when economic times are tough government is viewed as the evil intruder, visited upon us only to make the problem worse.

Contrary to this “we versus them” attitude, the harsh and admittedly controversial reality is that the government is indeed us! With the horrendous Mississippi budget situation hanging over the heads of every citizen no one should be caught envying the position of a Mississippi Legislator. To understand this statement we should perhaps revisit “Public Policy Making and Public Program Implementation 101.”

Not only do we have a representative form of government where we choose who will do our public business, but we also cherish our “demand/response relationship” that allows us to express our desires to our elected officials in expectation of a response. Inherent in this ability to make demands on government is our assumption (often quite erroneously) that all of our fellow citizens share completely in our ideas of the programs that government should undertake and how government should spend that portion of our money made available for

the purposes of government's carrying out the functions that we expect from it. The fact is that no public program, particularly one that costs money, is created when there is no demand for it. This becomes all too clear when times like these are visited upon us, and cuts must be made. In fact, it is probably a safe assumption that more citizens show up in an effort to save programs targeted for cutbacks or elimination than likely appeared when the program was created. This is proof positive that government is indeed us because we demand that government does what it does.

Governor Haley Barbour boldly lay on the table a number of programs that he and his staff maintain should be considered for merger, consolidation or elimination in the name of addressing the current unprecedented revenue shortfall. Reactions to the Governor's proposals have been interesting and certainly, if one have observed government for very long, not unexpected. A good example to use to illustrate these reactions has to do with the Governor's proposal to reduce the number of public school districts from 152 to 100. Plenty of fairly well-informed citizens are quick to point out that 152 school districts are too many for Mississippi. Yet when the grim reaper of school consolidation all of a sudden taps on the doors of any number of the mostly rural schools that these good folks hold dear, the resistance to such consolidation becomes palpable. "Surely," they opine, "the consolidators had in mind those districts that had not reached 'Level 4' or higher or those districts whose basketball teams or football teams had never won a State Championship." Sentiments and affections for the communities of which that local school is the anchor become overwhelming.

This translates into tremendous pressure on those whom we send forth from our communities to represent us in the halls of the legislature. The above scenario is repeated numerous times with other programs that some may consider expendable, but which many others consider vital to personal and community well-being. Local hospitals, Medicare/Medicaid, Public Health /Mental Health, Public Safety, Transportation, Community colleges and Universities, water and sewer facilities, economic development facilities and professionals and a growing list of public services of all sorts all have their constituents who pay their taxes and who consider a given program as a primary component in an effort to achieve a reasonable quality of life.

Members of the Mississippi Legislature are greeted daily by purveyors of all of these interests and many more. The lower rotunda of the Mississippi Capitol is filled with representatives of associations and organizations of every type as a show of voter strength for their particular cause.

So do you want to know who that ominous interloper called government really is? If you will simply look in the mirror in the morning and give it a little thought you will realize that representative government in this democratic country of ours is us – all of us together.

It is a daunting proposition that a legislator must face to on the one hand stare into the cold empty coffers in Jackson and on the other hand look toward home at all those things that the people who sent them label "the good life" and make a decision that in spite of demands to the contrary, government has done all that it can.

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