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About Hang Together

Who We Are

# HANG TOGETHER

*"We must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all  
hang separately." – Benjamin Franklin*

## A PEOPLE WHO HAS A GOVERNMENT, OR A GOVERNMENT THAT HAS A PEOPLE?

*Posted on September 5, 2012 by Daniel Kelly*

“**T**HE GOVERNMENT IS THE ONLY THING THAT WE ALL BELONG TO.” So says a kindly-sounding gentleman in a video played at the Democratic National Convention. An almost off-hand, but thought-provoking idea.

That one compact statement raises a question I thought we had settled quite some time ago: Are we a people who has a government, or a government that has a people? Pretty much the whole of Western political history is the story of becoming the former and fleeing the latter. And our pursuit of freedom, and flight from government’s proprietary embrace, has traditionally been something on which we have been of one mind.

But is that as true now as it has been in the past? The gentleman’s statement, as well as others made at the national conventions, suggests we ought to explicitly revisit what it is that holds us all together, what it is that has traditionally made us “one people.” Here are a few.

We don’t belong to the government. Government belongs to us. That is the gist of Abraham Lincoln’s formulation that ours is a “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” This is not a merely semantic quibble. We are fond of saying we are a sovereign people in this country. And that is quite true, which is why our Constitution’s preamble explains that it is “we the people” who established a more perfect union. The government did not arise of its own accord, nor did it create its own authority. It does not exist except by our consent, and cannot operate but through the authority we choose to delegate. We could be said to belong to a government only if it was totalitarian and tyrannical – at which point even John Locke would throw a flag and declare a revolution.

And let's not forget that the "American government" is not the same thing as the "American people." Government is something we – the American people – created to accomplish limited and particular objectives. We must fervently hope that the government is not the only thing that binds us together. After all, governments (wherever and whenever they exist) are organisms with a very small repertoire: They can compel people to do that which they do not want to do, and prevent them from doing that which they *do* want to do. That's good, as far as it goes. Life would be an uncertain thing if government didn't effectively prevent others from stealing our property or threatening our lives. And getting home from the office this evening would be a dicey affair if we couldn't compel people to drive on the right side of the road.

But it is a cold and barren community in which the only common link between the members is an instrument of coercion. In fact, if that is all there is, we cannot properly call it a community at all. Communities, real ones, have their primary existence and dynamic core outside of government. We build them on shared moral assumptions, a common (though dynamic) culture, certain and identifiable principles, and a sense of identity attractive to its members. These are the things that give life and color and meaning to our national community. And those constitutive elements of community foster generosity, sacrifice, and the rest of the noble virtues that form a nation – a people – of which we can be proud.

Government exists to protect these things, not supply them. Its role is essential, but by its very nature limited. It cannot make you love your neighbor, sacrifice for your children, or volunteer at the food pantry. It cannot ennoble you or bring meaning to your labor. It has never brought community or national greatness, and it never will.

Government cannot, *must* not, be the only thing we have in common. It would be too sad to bear were it true.

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## *12 Thoughts.*

***Greg Forster***

*September 5, 2012 at 3:27 pm*

Your basic point and especially your last sentence are right on. But I wonder if some of your statements don't go too far. I don't want to get into a fight about specific word choices with HT's resident legal eagle, but can you really reduce the story of western history to our becoming a people that has a government rather than a government that has a people? Did anything else happen in that time?

Do you press too far the signifiacnce of the phrase “belong to”? Don’t they mean “belong to” in the sense that I belong to a club, not in the sense that my possessions belong to me? Membership rather than property?

Deeper question: Is government the only *institution* in which we all have membership?

Reply

***Daniel Kelly***

*September 5, 2012 at 4:26 pm*

Good questions.

There are plenty of other important things that have happened in Western history over the last millennium, but in Western \*political\* history the story of people climbing the flanks of Mount Olympus to push government down to its foot is the dominating theme.

It is conceivable that the video used “belonging to” in the sense of joining a club, but the statement then either loses any cognizable meaning or mistakes the very nature of government. Governments share no attributes with clubs. Governments exist to protect pre-existing rights; nothing more. Clubs exist to achieve some of the goals and desires that go into creating a community. One enforces, the other aspires. One is compulsory, the other voluntary.

Additionally, the context is government-centric. Reading the language in light of the surrounding material, as good lawyers and students of the language must, the fairest conclusion is that the statement reflects a sensibility of

government as the hub and source of community. And in that sense, yes, it does suggest a paternalistic proprietary interest in us.

The deeper question is most interesting. Although I do not think it is accurate to speak of having “membership” in the government (for the reasons I explained above and in the post), whether it is the only national institution is worth exploring. I believe not, but I will have to address that later because duty calls.

*Reply*

***Greg Forster***

*September 5, 2012 at 4:53 pm*

There are important ways in which government is one among many “hubs” of community, and “belong to” may bear that meaning for this audience. “Source” of community in the sense you mean it is another matter – that would have proprietary implications we couldn’t accept.

One common feature of campaign discourse is that it’s designed to mean different things to different people. I suspect this language was chosen (no doubt after extensive focus-grouping) because it resonated with the largest set of voters. And I suspect it does so because for some it gratifies the desire to affirm government as a protector/patron, essentially an owner, while for others it merely comes across as affirmation of government as one locus of social solidarity – which it is.

*Reply*

***Daniel Kelly***

*September 5, 2012 at 6:48 pm*

Greg, is that Shepherd Book from Firefly?

***Greg Forster***

*September 6, 2012 at 12:09 pm*

Not. Gonna. Happen.

***Jim Wilke***

*September 5, 2012 at 4:29 pm*

The people created the government, so the people have a government. Further, the people fashioned the limits of its government in Article One, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution.

*Reply*

***Jennifer Gruber***

*September 5, 2012 at 6:17 pm*

Hmm. Interesting comments, all. I am not a college-educated person, so I feel a little silly leaving a comment here. However, that being said and because I always have to leave my two cents' worth . . .

I am a mother, wife, sister, daughter, and American. Why is being an American at the bottom of this list? In most other aspects of my life, I am the sole or joint decision-maker. Being an American makes me part of a collective decision-making process. Hey, I like to get my own way and think I am right most of the time (all the time if you ask my husband). Being an American means having to compromise more, having to see the viewpoints of others more, and having to concede things I would never concede in my personal life; but I still get to make decisions.

As a mother, my job is to prepare my children to forge their own way and make decisions based on a belief-system I have given them. I do not want them living in my basement at 30, unable to make decisions or mistakes for themselves. The purpose of government is very close to the role of a parent. Yes, you want people to conduct themselves according to a system of rules. Yes, you want people to make the most logical decisions for themselves. Does that mean you as a parent or the government has the right to dictate every aspect of life “for your own good.” Do you think I liked giving my kids a push on their bikes knowing they would fall numerous times before learning to ride a bike? Of course not. Will I like turning my children out into the world when they are grown knowing they may fall again? Of course not. However, I would be robbing them of the self-esteem and self-satisfaction of succeeding if I were to keep them under my thumb “for their own good.”

Sure, they may find it fabulous to sit on the couch at first with me making all the hard choices and providing food, room and board, and all the other things people mistakenly think the government should provide. Unfortunately, this will ultimately be their undoing. I will have robbed them of their chance to prove themselves and shine. Anyone who believes they belong to the



government as opposed to the government belonging to them has just placed themselves on the basement couch of the White House.

The role of the government is to set out guidelines and give some assistance to those incapable of taking care of themselves or who find themselves on hard times. Government should never be seen as the solution to our problems. We are the solution to our problems.

There. I'm sure you're all hoping I don't post again!!

*Reply*

***Greg Forster***

*September 6, 2012 at 2:44 pm*

Welcome! Thanks for your reflections – we want to hear from everyone. I hope you'll not only hang around (together?) with us here on HT, but give us your comments as often as you feel moved to say something!

*Reply*

Pingback: [Do We Belong to the Government or Does that Government Belong to Us? | @ActonInstitute PowerBlog](#)

***Luken***

*September 11, 2012 at 1:02 pm*

“But it is a cold and barren community in which the only common link between the members is an instrument of coercion. In fact, if that is all there is, we

cannot properly call it a community at all.”

I’m gonna have to use this quote... very compelling. I’ve always found the church to be a better community because it is voluntary association, not compelled.

*Reply*

***Daniel Kelly***

*September 11, 2012 at 1:48 pm*

Glad you like it – use it in good health!

Dan.

*Reply*

***Jim Nothstine***

*September 11, 2012 at 2:14 pm*

The Constitution is the document that binds us together as citizens of a free nation and the Constitution is what our military men and women take an oath to defend. Our Government must do the same.

*Reply*

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