

Star-Bulletin
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DO we have too much government? During a recent "Price of Paradise" talk show on Hawaii Public Radio, host Randall Roth posed the question to Pacific Business News founder and editorial page editor George Mason and UH Professor of Public Administration Dolores Foley.

ROTH: Dolores, is government in Hawaii too big?

FOLEY: I think this is the wrong question. We should be concerned with what government is doing and how government is doing it.

ROTH: Can I at least ask how big government is in Hawaii?

FOLEY: We do have a high proportion of government workers. We're above the national average, but there are still 19 states that have more government workers per capita.

ROTH: Are we getting more government workers all the time?

MASON: In February 1990, there were 103,300 people working for government — federal, state and local. In February 1993, there were 114,200. That increase of 10,900 were all state employees — a 10.6 percent increase in three years — while the private sector went from 417,500 to 422,900 for a total increase of 5,400 jobs, or a 1.3 percent increase in private sector employment in the whole state.

ROTH: What do those numbers mean?

MASON: That government has been increasing at a rate about 10 times that of the private sector, not just in recent years, but since 1970.

ROTH: Dolores, does this mean that eventually everyone's going to work for the government in Hawaii?

FOLEY: One of the reasons why government has grown so big is because we demand much more, we the citizens. Business always talks about government interfering, but every time you turn around, they're always asking for government protection, incentives or help.

ROTH: Is that true, George?

MASON: I want less government; I've been preaching for less government for a long time. Most of the pressure (for growth) in the last 15 to 20 years has come from public sector unions. The Hawaii Government Employees Association, the UPW, the National Education Association, the Hawaii Federation of Teachers, it goes on and on, plus the construction unions. These are the people who can round up campaign workers and campaign contributions, and they are the ones to whom politicians are really beholden.

ROTH: So in terms of growth in government, the primary explanation is the strength of government worker unions in Hawaii?

PRICE OF PARADISE

DO WE HAVE TOO MUCH GOVERNMENT?





George Mason
Randall Roth
Dolores Foley

number of things could be privatized, but it's not a panacea.

ROTH: George, you've written a lot about privatization. What (government functions) should not be given to the private sector?

MASON: Oh, a lot of things. I'm not sure I'd want to see the National Guard privatized. I think maybe there still ought to be a tax office, but after 90 days the uncollected taxes ought to be turned over to private collection agencies. The delinquent taxes in this state are horrendous!

ROTH: We've used the term privatization. What does that mean?

MASON: I attended a privatization conference earlier this year, and county people and city people were there, about 300 of them. I said, "Why are you here?" and they all gave me one answer: "We're out of money." And so they're trying to turn as many things over to the private sector as possible. A lot of prisons have been built and are managed by the private sector; in the northeast mainland there are private toll roads. A very recent local example was Steve Yamashiro, the mayor of the Big Island, and the County Council voted to give a contract for a new landfill on the Kona Coast to a waste management company.

ROTH: Is privatization part of the solution?

FOLEY: It is part, but we have to be careful. I think there are a number of functions that shouldn't be privatized. In many places, when they've actually had government and private sectors bids, they often have found that the private sector isn't more cost effective.

MASON: You're absolutely right, there are instances where the public employees have bid against private companies and they've won. But do you know why? Because they said, "Hey, we don't need this, we don't need that, we've got too many supervisors, etc." and then they'll win against private companies.

ROTH: Dolores, what would you do to make government as good as you could possibly make it?

FOLEY: One of the things I would do is turn it around from focusing on the inputs to focusing on outcomes. So that means looking at performance, at results. Not just, "Do we have the right equipment or the right people?" but "Are the things getting done?"

ROTH: George, you said that Hawaii, at least the state government, is going to run out of money. What did you mean by that?

MASON: Because all the rest of us are running out of money, and we're going to put an end to this excessive taxation load that we carry. We have a terrible tax burden here. At least 25-30 percent more than most places I know. You see, this 4 percent excise tax, the way it pyramids it is really closer to 12 percent. And it has a terrible impact on lower income people.

ROTH: But, Dolores, I assume you would say it has to be high if government's going to provide all the things that we the voters demand that it provides.

FOLEY: Yes, one of the crucial things that has to happen is that as a community we have to begin to take more ownership and not just demand. One of the things we have to do is have a higher turnout for voting, neighborhood boards, attending public hearings. It's not going to get better unless we get involved.

ROTH: George, what would you do to make government better?

MASON: I'd probably do what the Democrats and the ILWU did in the late 1940s. They went and roused up all of these kids who just came back from the war, and made politicians of them. I attended the 1949 Democratic convention at McKinley High School, and I'll tell you, they were just a bunch of youngsters who later went through the ranks and became U.S. senators, judges and Bishop Estate trustees. But these youngsters ousted the Republican dynasty in 1954 very successfully. They took over the government, they were very idealistic. The problem (now) is they've been there too long. But if you want to raise a fuss, you want to change things, go right up to your university campus and get those young people stirred up and get them involved politically.

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