

A Civic Calling:

BY PATRICK BRESSETTE

“I confess to a prejudice. I believe that cities are the most important single unit of human society. They are to human beings what beehives are to bees. Human beings are fundamentally community beings. ... No other level of government has to face so directly the reality of how well or poorly we work as a human community. We are bound together. The municipal leader knows it, and sees it.”

— Reverend Ben Campbell

So begins a remarkable speech given to a gathering of municipal employees and leaders in Virginia on October 25, 2005. It is an insightful observation made vivid by an analogy that calls up all the complexities and community interactions that hum through cities, towns and villages. As a municipal leader, you are at the center of these fundamental “units of human society.” Your city or town is also the unit of government closest to the people. The actions, decisions and delivery of services that you oversee are fundamental to the quality of life that people experience every day.

At one level, people do appreciate their schools, parks, libraries and other public services. But if you ask them what they think about government, you will not receive many positive responses. This disconnect—between the actual work of government and the superficial attitudes held by most people about its role—is both a cause and a consequence of our decades-long slide in faith and trust in government.

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The Municipal Leader's Role in Rebuilding Trust in Government

Without trust, however, public decision-making is hampered; civic engagement withers; and municipal leaders struggle to build the public support they will need to manage and lead their communities effectively. Making progress on the challenges and opportunities that communities face today will require a rebuilding of trust in government and a renewed civic partnership between public officials and citizens. As sociologist Gianfranco Poggi, who has written extensively about the development of modern governance, observes: “[T]rust is probably the moral orientation that most needs to be diffused among the people if republican society is to be maintained.”

CONSEQUENCES OF CYNICISM

The trust challenge is as stark today as it has ever been. We are in the midst of a political and cultural period with anti-government rhetoric at an all-time high and public trust in government at an historic low. But puzzling contradictions roil beneath the surface of the current public mood. How can it be that dramatic failures in the private sector—from the Wall Street collapse to the BP oil spill—have not highlighted the essential protective and public interest roles of government? How can polls show historically low levels of trust in government and, at the same time, deep support for many of the actual programs of government? How can people passionately defend their schools, libraries, parks and social services, but seem unaware of the role that adequate funding plays in the maintenance of these public goods? These contradictions reveal complexities in what “trust in government” actually means, and, therefore, what rebuilding trust entails.

It's quite possible that the root causes of public distrust in government—and, thus, the clues to its rebuilding—do not exist in government per se, but are more

directly related to trust itself, to its fragility in the complex world in which we live, and to the damaging consequences of cynicism in our current political culture. This, of course, has implications for municipal leaders struggling to engage their constituents in meaningful ways as they address unprecedented fiscal and policy challenges.

At Dēmos, a nonpartisan public policy research and advocacy organization, the notion that trust is a foundational value in a democratic society informs one of our core goals: To rebuild public trust and support for government and its role. We believe that without a reasonable level of faith and trust in government, our ability as a country to address the whole range of challenges and opportunities of this new century will be hamstrung. We further believe that this task must be taken on directly.

How then do we rebuild trust? And what kind of trust are we trying to restore?

Trust is multifaceted; it can be based in practical and functional experiences, but it can also spring from values-based judgments that underpin a kind of trust more akin to “faith.” Any successful effort to rebuild trust in government must address both of these kinds of trust—trust in the functions of public institutions as well as trust in shared purposes—trust in “how” and trust in “why.”

Municipal leaders grapple with this challenge every day. There are many worthy efforts to examine how local government operates, to modernize systems and processes, to improve the delivery of services, and to find new ways to involve the public more effectively. To date, most approaches to rebuilding trust have focused on these sorts of practical changes—attempting to fix the “how” of government as a way to rebuild trust. While these efforts are admirable, the way we talk about them can actually *undermine* trust. When we campaign “to root out waste, abuse and inefficiency,” and point to some of the savings we have identified, the public often asks, “If they

found that much, imagine how much more there must be.” It is one thing to articulate how to run government well, but quite another to reinforce damaging stereotypes along the way.

While we focus on improving the “how” of government, a deeper challenge remains. We must renew a shared sense of the unique mission and purpose of government in any successful society. We have to answer the “why” question. But how do we engage the public in the “why” of government? How do we push through the negative stereotypes of government and the cynical disconnection most people feel from public systems so that a more civic-minded participation can be renewed?

For the past five years the Public Works program at Dēmos has been working on this challenge. We have sponsored a series of research efforts that have explored the “hidden reasoning” that people use when thinking about government. We have been working to unpack what is beneath the “lack-of-trust” poll numbers. Our research partners have used the tools of cognitive science, psychology, anthropology and linguistics to get at the root of this problem. And we have taken what we have learned to the field, working with community leaders, public officials, advocates and others to change how people perceive, and interact with, government.

We have learned that, in trying to improve public perceptions of government and rebuild trust, we face some significant challenges. But there are also hopeful signs that change is possible. Negative views of government are indeed dominant, but these views are not as entrenched as many believe, and there are concrete ways to engage the public in more pragmatic, civic-minded considerations of the public sector and its role.

THE CHALLENGES

Our research brought into focus three prevailing perceptions of government that stand in the way of trust:

A CIVIC CALLING

- **Just Politics:** When thinking about government, most Americans tend to toggle back and forth between two different and superficial images of government. The first is an image of government as a partisan and political boxing match. When people are thinking of government as “just politics,” they apply negative stereotypes of elected officials—corrupt and partisan—to the whole of government. This view of government also leads people to act as passive spectators, rather than participants, in public life. They have difficulty seeing government as “us”—as our collective tool for achieving common goals and aspirations.
- **The Blurry Bureaucracy:** The other dominant image of government is that of a large and blurry bureaucracy whose functions are unclear and hard to understand. Americans don’t readily recognize the active network of public agencies, employees and services that are carrying out important public functions every day. In this mindset, they tend to exaggerate waste, bloat and inefficiency, and they are confused over where tax money goes and what it supports.
- **Government as Vending Machine:** The third challenge is more of a cultural one. We live in a highly consumerist society, and the habits of consumer thinking have been bleeding into the civic sphere in damaging ways. When people approach government as mere “consumers,” they tend to bring a “what’s in it for me and what’s it going to cost” perspective to the interaction. They see government as a vending machine from which they choose and pay for services. This consumer stance obscures notions of the things we do through government that benefit the whole community, that protect our shared public interests and purposes. A consumerist perspective leads to narrow-minded statements like, “Why should I pay property taxes? My kids aren’t in school anymore.”

Any strategies to engage the public with government more productively will have to be cognizant of these powerful drivers of perception.

THE GOOD NEWS

Not far below these dominant and negative perceptions, there is actually a set of

powerful, if latent, perspectives ready to be tapped and awakened. Our research and field work have revealed that when people are reminded of the unique mission and purpose of government, and given vivid and concrete images of the public systems and structures necessary to achieve those goals, they can engage in questions about government in a more reasonable, pragmatic and problem-solving manner. Despite the power of consumerist thinking, people are ready to be called to act as civic-minded participants in community life.

Negative views of government are indeed dominant, but these views are not as entrenched as many believe. There are concrete ways to engage the public in more pragmatic, civic-minded considerations of the public sector and its role.

Here are some things we can consider to reawaken these more positive attitudes:

- **Mission and Purpose:** To get past the sense that government is merely a political spectator sport, we must speak directly to government’s unique and important purpose. We need to highlight the public-interest values that government, at its best, acts from and embodies. People can readily be reminded that government’s job is to plan for the future, to be a good steward of our resources, and to build and preserve community life. Once reminded, people can and do see government as more than “just politics.”
- **Systems and Structures:** Government is only dimly understood by most Americans; it is difficult for people to remember the scope and diversity of its day-to-day work. We need to bring back into focus the actual activities of government by reminding people of the many public systems and structures we have built over decades that underpin our quality of life, the functioning of our economy, and the safety and security of our communities. We need to find succinct and vivid ways of explaining how government works in order to foster more “system awareness.”
- **Civic Thinking:** To elevate a citizen stance toward government and combat the pitfalls of consumerist thinking, we need to reinforce notions of interdepen-

dence and how the well-being of our communities depends on how we work together and support each other. We need to call people to play a role—to be partners with their government in addressing problems and creating opportunities.

The awakening of more supportive attitudes toward government will not happen on its own. Dominant stereotypes of government pervade our public discourse and are constantly reinforced by our culture and our media. To push through the anti-government chatter will take deliberate

and persistent efforts to communicate differently about government and public programs. It will also require that we find new ways to engage the public directly in the work of government.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

The following are two examples of local government efforts to rebuild trust in both the “how” and “why” of government.

The first is a service being offered by the School Board in Albemarle County, Virginia, which is bringing public meetings to the people—by phone. The School Board uses a teleconferencing system that integrates computers, the Internet and fiber optics to make massive conference calls possible. When the School Board is seeking input on important decisions, such as the school budget, it calls the 29,000 households in the county and offers residents an opportunity to listen in and offer their opinions. Callers can be making their dinner and “attending” the hearing at the same time. The system also allows for touch-tone polling and the ability to address the board directly.

The new service, which garnered the attention of National Public Radio in 2009, recognizes that school board and city council meetings cannot compete with prime-time TV, cable and the Internet—not to mention the everyday stresses faced by parents. Brian Wheeler, who

was the chair of the Albemarle School Board when the service was launched, said just a small number of people would actually make the trip to public budget hearings, despite the fact that they were advertised in the newspaper and on the radio, but more than 1,500 people tuned in to at least part of a recent hearing held through the conference-call system.

Albemarle County was one of the first local governments to give the calling system a try. The School Board doesn't use it for every meeting, just for important public hearings. The cost, about \$4,000, may seem like a lot, but at 7 cents a call, it's cheaper than direct mail. And you don't have to waste paper or burn fuel to get to a tele-town-hall meeting, making this a "greener" form of government. Such a system is not going to solve all the challenges of civic engagement, but it is one example of thinking differently that is yielding a more informed and connected public.

An example of addressing the "why" question can be found in the region around Eau Claire, Wisconsin, where local leaders, advocates and public servants have banded together in the Alliance for Strong Communities. The alliance, a nonpartisan regional network of organizations, is a conscious and deliberate effort to reset the relationship between citizens and their government.

Formed in 2008, the alliance recognizes that local communities are in the midst of an historic period of transition that is redefining the roles and capacities of citizens, community institutions, local governments and schools. Some proposals for change during this transition would risk severing the vital connections between essential public structures—physical, organizational and social systems that help define our community, allow us to get things done, and help to ensure our health and well-being—and an enduring quality of life. The alliance is pursuing a different path. Its members have agreed to change how they communicate with constituents, and to involve the public in forums as a way of coming together around solutions to shared challenges. They are consciously engaging their constituents in a conversation about the "why" of government—the role it plays in the life of the community and its people and the shared responsibility

that all elements of the Eau Claire region have in building and maintaining the public systems that serve as a foundation for community life. They have found vivid and concrete ways to describe the work of government differently.

In her 2011 "State of the City" address, Eau Claire City Council President Kerry Kincaid described government as the public structure of a community much like the bones, organs and muscles are the structure of a body. This structure, she said, is what provides the support for thoughtful public policy and planning.

THE TASK AHEAD

Albemarle County, Eau Claire and many other places around the country are demonstrating that a central element of rebuilding trust in government is to reconnect people to the mission and purpose of our public systems and structures. Even as we rethink and improve the "how" of government, we need to answer the "why" questions too—why are the programs, policies and services we care about essential to our shared well-being? When we engage in this conversation directly, we tap into latent but powerful beliefs about the shared public purposes that are the reasons for government in the first place.

As deeply challenging as it might seem, this is the kind of trust—a trust in shared purposes—that we need to rebuild. It calls upon us to be optimistic and aspirational in our defense of government—to articulate what can be, and should be, not only "what is not."

In his 2005 speech in Virginia, Rev. Campbell suggested that municipal leaders have a unique and important role to play in creating shared public trust.

"[This] is the business of calling our people together. It falls to public leaders to have a picture of the whole city, and to tell it over and over, so that our citizens know who they are. We are so individualized, we do not see ourselves as citizens of a common entity, and members of the same civic family, unless someone builds the picture for us in words."

Building that civic picture should be the calling of every municipal leader. Trust in government is linked to trust in each other, to finding shared goals and objectives, to identifying common pur-

Rebuilding Public Trust in Government

The Hurdles

- People tend to see government as nothing more than politics—a partisan boxing match.
- People don't understand what government does and how it enhances their lives.
- People view government through a consumer lens. (If I pay X, what do I get?)

The Answers

- We need to highlight the public-interest values that government, at its best, acts from and embodies.
- We need to remind people of the many public systems and structures, established by government, that underpin our quality of life, our economy, and our safety.
- We need to avoid engaging in a consumerist view of government, instead focusing on how the well-being of our communities depends on how we work together and support each other.

– Patrick Bresette

poses, and to promoting the belief that problems can be addressed and opportunities can be created by working together. These are the foundations of a government "of, by and for" the people. ❁

The text of Rev. Campbell's speech is available at www.vml.org/CONF/05CRichmond/05ConfHandouts/PrayerBreakfast.doc.

To hear the NPR story about the Albemarle County School District, visit www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100831091.

For more about the Alliance for Strong Communities, visit www.ci.eau-claire.wi.us/news-section/2143-alliance-for-strong-communities.

For more about Eau Claire City Council President Kerry Kincaid's State of the City presentation, visit http://web.ci.eau-claire.wi.us/2011_state_of_the_city/2011_state_of_the_city.pdf or www.youtube.com/cityofeauclairer#p/1u11OKwIOIfYMJo.