

We all benefit by giving hope to both rich and poor

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A long time ago in 335 BCE, a Greek philosopher, Aristotle, was presenting his lectures to his students at the Lyceum in Athens, Greece. In his view, the study of politics was one of the highest forms of ethics. In fact, Aristotle reserved his classes on politics for older students because he believed that in order to understand politics in an ethical sense one needed to be old enough to have had experiences in the work-a-day environment of life beyond an academic setting.

To be a good student of politics, one needed to understand ethical concepts of justice, honesty, fairness, and the importance of the state as compared to the lesser importance of oneself. A good politician would need to be responsible and be concerned with the welfare of the whole state and understand the importance of truth and the highest ethical principles. In Aristotle's words, ".....while it is desirable to secure what is good in the case of the individual, to do so in the case of a people or a state is something finer and more sublime." (Aristotle, The Object of Life, Book 1, The Nicomachean Ethics)*

I have recently received several emails which are meant to convince the reader that what politics is about is to enhance individual welfare and protect the wealthy from sharing their riches with those who are poor and needy. These emails which are similar to each other list 5 ideas below that represent an ethical view quite different from that of Aristotle. My response follows each of the 5 points.

1. You cannot legislate the poor into prosperity by legislating the wealthy out of prosperity.

1. Citizens in United States may often think of Canada as a socialist country. As Canadians we may think of ourselves as mildly socialistic, but we may regard Scandinavian countries as more socialistic. Scandinavians in turn may think of Communist governments of Russia, China and Cuba as more socialistic. None of

these countries has ever attempted to legislate “the wealthy out of prosperity”. In fact, the number of millionaires in all the three communist countries above is growing in number with Russia having over a million millionaires.

2. What one person receives without working for, another person must work for without receiving.

2. If you are poor and without a job, you may feel that the people who receive money without working are actually the wealthy people who can live on the accumulated interest on their investments.

3. The government cannot give to anybody anything that the government does not take from somebody else.

3. This is true. Any government which wants to assist underprivileged people needs to raise money through taxes and fees for its services. If we want the economy to improve the welfare of all, governments need to increase taxes from those who already have the most wealth.

4. You cannot multiply wealth by dividing it.

4. Again this is a true statement. We can only help the needy by having those with money share some of it with others. That is, the wealthy can keep most of their money, but “divide” some of it with those who are poor. Only the wealthy become even more wealthy when they are allowed to “multiply” all of their money and keep it for themselves.

5. When half of the people get the idea that they do not have to work because the other half is going to take care of them, and when the other half gets the idea that it does no good to work because somebody else is going to get what they work for, that is the beginning of the end of any nation.

5. Presently we have an unemployment rate of about 6.5 or 7 % in Canada. This is a long way from having half the people who don't work. Nearly all of the 7% would like to find work as soon as they can. We are a long piece away from having half the people who don't want to work and who want the wealthy half to “take care of them”.

In summary, a free enterprise capitalistic system can benefit more citizens when it is modified by governments to give hope to both the rich and the poor.

*Note: Aristotle also made many references to the connections between good politics and good ethics In Books II through to Book X in his major work on ethics, The Nicomachean Ethics.