
A Consensus Society

BY RUSSELL MADDEN

My wife and I last year completed a 5,000-mile road trip to Washington and back. A friend we visited in Seattle is a librarian in that city's system. While we were there, she alerted us to the upcoming grand opening of the brand-new \$165 million Seattle Central Library. Along with a few thousand Seattle residents, we lined up outside to inspect this new construction. With a (relatively) rare blue sky and temperatures warming into the 70s, we waited for the opening ceremonies and our chance to join the throngs in exploring the library.

A festive atmosphere suffused the crowd. The concentration of people also brought out local political activists with a variety of petitions for signing. Seattle is known for its "liberal" bent, so I was unsurprised at the subject of the petition a middle-aged gentlemen asked me to sign.

He and his coworkers wanted to halt a proposal to finance charter schools with tax dollars. Person after person signed the petition, nodding to his assurances that allowing this change to occur would "destroy our public school system."

When he looked at me, I told him I was a visitor but added that I would not have signed the petition anyway. (Of course, no taxes should be used for any kind of school.) I was prepared to leave the situation at that, but the fellow pursued the subject and questioned my answer.

"But charter schools would hurt public education."

I looked at him and said, "I think all schools should be private. I don't think government has any business regulating ideas."

The astonished expression on his face quickly hardened into annoyance. "But we live in a consensus society," he said, evidently astounded at my abysmal ignorance. "We've voted to support public education."

"There are some things that we are not supposed to vote on," I said, growing equally irked. "That's what the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are all about."

He waved toward the looming glass wall of the new library. "Then you must think that libraries should be private, too!" he said hotly. "That people should have to pay to use them."

I nodded. "Yes. All libraries should be private, too."

He leaned closer and sneered, clearly unable to comprehend my alien mindset. "Well, welcome to my library. Enjoy." With that, he moved along to friendlier, more receptive environs.

While we ended up not visiting the library until a day or two later (a separate story), this random encounter encapsulated one of the biggest problems undermining the integrity of our society. This gentleman's invocation of the phrase "consensus society" was clearly designed to crush any objections I had to his

Russell Madden (rdmadden@earthlink.net) teaches writing at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and is a freelance writer.

plans. For him, as long as people reach a “consensus,” no one else has a legitimate right to complain. Dissenters simply have to accept what a majority of their fellow citizens desire and have voted to support.

(Even in this, the activist was wrong. In communication theory, “consensus decision-making” occurs only when everyone examines an issue and eventually agrees that solution X is the best one given the constraints of the situation. NB: *Everyone* has to agree to support the solution for there to be a true consensus.)

As have most Americans, this activist has all but obliterated the concept of “freedom” from his thoughts and submerged what tattered fragments remain beneath the crushing weight of “consensus,” that is, democracy or voting. His proprietary attitude regarding the Seattle Central Library no doubt arose because *he* voted in favor of the taxes to fund it.

Pure democracy. Majoritarianism. Collectivism. Consensus. By any name, the notion that the “good” is defined by how many people support it; that any policy garnering the most votes can and should be imposed on an unwilling minority; that no area of life should be off limits to the “will of the people”—all these beliefs are profoundly dangerous. They have been used throughout history to justify not only the most heinous actions imaginable but also those that are the most petty and intrusive on our day-to-day existences.

As Ayn Rand wrote in “The New Fascism: Rule by Consensus” (in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*), governing by consensus means “that statistics should be substituted for truth, vote-counting for principles, numbers for rights, and public polls for morality . . . that the number of . . . adherents should be the criterion of an idea's truth or falsehood—that any desire . . .

should be accepted as a valid claim, provided it is held by a sufficient number of people—that a majority may do anything it pleases to a minority.”

Cost-Free Concern

The attitudes of the activist I met are hardly new. With variations, even his catch phrase, “a consensus society,” enjoys a long and multihued history. He and the others passing out petitions in front of the library cloaked their goals in the common language of “concern” and “compassion” to make their actions more palatable, both to themselves and to their audience. The folks in the crowd who signed the petitions no doubt considered themselves to be kind, thoughtful, and charitable individuals. They could easily, effortlessly scribble their signatures filled with a feeling that they were “concerned” citizens doing “good”—without any immediate cost to themselves.

Sadly, the man who confronted me is, of course, correct: we *do* live in a “consensus society.” There is no area of society that is not subject in one way or another to the god of democracy. If some small areas of existence yet remain for us alone to decide, that simply means the “consensus” has yet to turn its cyclopean eye in that direction.

What the advocates of a “consensus society” have yet to understand—or still refuse to accept—is that at the end of the road on which they have embarked lies an omnipotent government, a government that can not only do many things for them, but many things *to* them. When the dragon they helped create eventually turns on and devours them, it will be far too late for them to realize and acknowledge that the only consensus appropriate for a society is one that supports freedom. 