

Reform without Crisis

Romney challenges citizens to demand that states, cities modernize to play rightful role.

By **GEORGE ROMNEY***

CHURCHILL, Lincoln and others have called attention to a dangerous deficiency in free societies—the inability to secure fundamental reform without a crisis. The reluctance of candidates and public officials to discuss controversial issues for fear of losing votes denies citizens the knowledge required to support action before events themselves produce such knowledge and support.

One question of our time that cries for an answer is: How do we get the modernization of state and local governments without a crisis? In an emergency, basic changes can be made. But if there is none, most citizens and officials prefer not to rock the boat. Just as one cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs, one also cannot make fundamental improvement in government without rocking a few boats.

For government to be forced into a critical situation before improvements can be made is not only inefficient but dangerous. Well known are cases where crises arose but the governmental structure could not respond fast enough to meet them. We must find an answer to this question; we must discover how to make improvements without being forced into a corner.

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It is a task for citizens as individuals, for voluntary groups and, importantly, for political parties. It is a process that must begin with education, greater citizen responsibility and involvement, and it requires the spelling out of alternatives to secure action without a crisis. When citizens are aroused and informed and know what to do, they can accomplish anything on earth.

They can do this, however, only when a sufficient number recognize that their citizenship responsibility comes ahead of every other responsibility save two—their responsibilities to their creator and to their families. The founders of the United States, in order to vest ultimate power and place primary responsibility for progress on the people themselves, created a federal structure—a republic. There is nothing unique about a federal structure itself or a republic.

Two republics on this earth, the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A., both have federal structures. The difference is that the Russian system is based primarily upon centralization and ours is based primarily on decentralization. This decentralization was brought about by providing for a limited government—limitations on federal functions and responsibilities, limitations upon states and through the states upon local functions—lodging basic power with the people themselves. This was done on the premise that government exists for the benefit

of the people, not the people for the benefit of the state.

This formula has produced a nation that has experienced industrial, human and social progress never previously approached. But our industrialization, urbanization, prosperity and the scientific age have confronted us with new problems which threaten the fundamental premise of the decentralization of governmental power and the vesting of ultimate responsibility in the hands of the people. Some of the major reasons for this situation are:

1. Obsolete state and local governments;

2. Neglect of county and city needs by states dominated largely by rural legislators;

3. The tremendous growth in this century of economic organizations and their special-interest power which has not been restricted to the economic arena. On the contrary, it has moved into the political arena on an organized basis in too many instances; and

4. The decline of political parties as instruments of citizenship during the period that special-interest groups have grown in power and size.

The parties and their candidates, for financial and other reasons, have tended to look more and more to well-organized economic groups because many of them are larger numerically and stronger financially than the parties. I think a lot of fuzzy thinking has developed with respect to the parties themselves and not just the Republican party.

I do not see how the political parties—and we must have a strong two-party system in our way of life

—can justify their role except on the basis of enabling individuals to discharge more adequately their citizenship responsibility. That's what they exist for! They do not exist to permit unions or union leaders, industry or industrial leaders, agriculture or agricultural leaders to accomplish their economic objectives and programs.

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In my opinion, the meeting of the problems of our nation, states and local governments is going to depend upon an awakening to the fact that citizens have the responsibility to participate in the political party of their choice as citizens and not as business people or union members or in any other economic capacity. Otherwise, they are subverting a party to their economic organization.

Awakened citizens and political parties must do much more than talk about the fact that our government exists to serve the people. States have no rights; people have rights. States do, however, have responsibilities. State and local governments must provide the means of change and not be obstacles to change. They are building blocks not roadblocks in the progress of our great nation. They must work as partners with the federal government.

All of us who have grown up in the west know very well the vital role played by the federal government in conquering its physical frontier and in its economic development. Now the federal government should play an equal role in conquering today's human and social frontiers.

In many ways, the federal role should be temporary, not permanent.

It ought to assist the states and local governments in meeting those problems which cannot be met by the individual or through private cooperation. But when federal administrators—by arbitrary decisions—can dictate to states, let alone local governments and individuals, there is cause for concern. This has been happening in Michigan and elsewhere. And this has caused concern and action by all governors regardless of party affiliation.

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How can we reverse the rapidly increasing concentration of power in Washington? Certainly, when states fail to act they encourage the trend. Almost 60 years ago Elihu Root emphasized this fact:

It is useless for the advocates of states' rights to inveigh against the supremacy of the constitutional laws of the United States or against the extension of national authority in the fields of necessary control where the states themselves fail in the performance of their duty. The instinct for self-government among the people of the United States is too strong to permit them long to respect anyone's right to exercise a power which he fails to exercise. The governmental control which they deem just and necessary they will have. It may be that such control would better be exercised in particular instances by the governments of the states, but the people will have the control they need, either from the states or from the national government; and if the states fail to furnish it in due measure, sooner or later constructions of the constitution will be found to vest the power where it will be exercised—in the national government.¹

One of the first goals must be to

¹ Elihu Root, address before the Pennsylvania Society, September 1906.

modernize the governments of states and localities. It is unrealistic to ask them to meet modern problems if they are not equipped to do so. But usually we wait until the machinery is breaking down before doing anything about it.

I have no doubt that Michigan would still have its horse-and-buggy constitution if it were not for our political and financial crisis that resulted in payless paydays back in 1959. That aroused Michigan people to the fact that there were some very fundamental shortcomings in the way their state government was doing business and that the tools the constitution provided its public officials were simply not honed for the job they were expected to do. The most important of these deficiencies was the hamstringing of state and local government and bad legislative apportionment. The air of crisis, in my opinion, was directly responsible for the success of the efforts toward constitutional reform.

Secondly, it is impossible to accomplish fundamental improvement unless the people are with you. Just as crisis provided the background music, so to speak, for constitutional reform in Michigan, so did citizen concern and action provide the foot soldiers who won the battle. We had to conduct five statewide elections and win four of them before we finally achieved the new constitution that so many other states view with envy. And it was the efforts of citizens—as individuals—that provided the measure of success in each case.

We had to amend the old constitution first to permit a majority of those voting on the question to call a

convention. (The state supreme court previously had declared that a convention call required a majority of all those voting in the election—a provision which defeated a 1958 convention call which had been approved by a majority.) We also changed the apportionment provision for convention delegates to make it fairer to urban areas. The petition drive was successful but only through the efforts of groups like the state League of Women Voters, Junior Chamber of Commerce, Michigan Municipal League, Citizens for Michigan, United Church Women, American Association of University Women and other like-minded private groups. In November 1960 the voters in a statewide referendum changed our old constitution to make it easier to call a convention. Then we had to vote on actually calling a convention; this question came up in April 1961 and the voters approved again.

The next step was electing delegates. We lost out on attempts to get the legislature to provide for non-partisan elections. So Republicans got the best candidates we could find and then worked hard for them. As a result, we gained a majority in the September 1961 special election.

The convention itself worked for nine and a half months in writing a constitution. But the battle was not over. In the spring election of 1963, we had an intense campaign over the new constitution, with the Republican party and others, including the Michigan Municipal League, fighting for the new document and the Democratic party and organized union leaders fighting against it. But we carried it.

In each of these five elections, starting with the setback in 1958 under the old constitutional provision, the key to eventual success was citizen participation. Individuals became aroused, they informed themselves and they worked for what they thought should be done. And they won. Familiar is the story of reform drives where citizens become aroused and decide that something ought to be done. In the Michigan story, citizens became aroused and decided they ought to do something. And they did it.

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Michigan's new constitution is a gem in many ways. Its provisions contain major improvements that other states and local units might well follow. It strengthens state and local governments so they can move to meet today's problems with today's and tomorrow's methods.

It contains a constitutional civil rights commission, well-equipped to deal with this most urgent of today's human problems; model provisions for a statewide board to coordinate and plan all education from kindergarten through the graduate level; provisions for county home rule and methods for local units of government to offer services cooperatively; broader taxing authority for local units; a modernized court structure; reorganized state administration, including longer terms for administrative officials, revamping of the 130 state agencies and commissions into not more than twenty principal departments, a legislative auditor general and other items of equal importance for efficient administration; realistic borrowing power for the

state, plus mandatory balanced budgets and other items to facilitate responsible handling of taxpayers' money; open meetings by legislative committees to minimize buckpassing and secrecy; a strong civil service system to reduce the effect of partisan patronage and many other matters.

In a word, Michigan's state constitution permits states and localities to do many things they should be doing. Our constitution does much more than just clear away the deadwood of the past; it brings government up to date and prepares for the future. These are very important improvements but not the entire story.

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As a citizen and state official, I am vitally concerned about the concentration of power in Washington and what this means to the freedom of individual action. Excessive concentration of power in big government should have been a very important element of our recent presidential campaign but, unfortunately, it got drowned by the torrents of campaign cloudbursts on war and peace, racial strife, crime in the streets, social security and other matters—all of them vital, of course. But excessive centralism in big government is a danger to the American way of life. And the way to control big government is not from the top down but from the bottom up.

We cannot conscientiously preach limited government, government close to the people, municipal control and responsibility if we continue to hamstring cities, counties and other local units with undesirable and archaic restrictions on their activities and resources.

We cannot conscientiously preach states' responsibility if we continue to encourage state governments to become citadels of the status quo by refusing to give them powers to match the obligations they face.

We cannot conscientiously urge the federal government to return to state and local governments activities the federal government has preempted unless state and local governments are capable and willing to live up to their responsibilities.

In state after state, their constitutions are roadblocks to the orderly and effective development of governmental responsibility and efficiency. This is one of the key reasons the Michigan constitution is so valuable, not only today but in the future, too. Other states must follow Michigan's lead in modernizing constitutions and updating city charters to make state and local governments the effective instruments for serving people they should be.

People have needs. If state and local governments are unwilling or unable to meet those needs, the federal government will continue to step in and gobble up state and local responsibilities. If we as responsible state and local officials permit this to happen, we have only ourselves to blame when and if concentrated centralism disrupts and eventually replaces our delicately but ingeniously balanced system of federal-state-local responsibility and authority.

We must not let local charters and state constitutions prohibit us from doing what must be done and what can be done better to help people at the level of government closest to

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were constituted as a committee to determine procedures for an ongoing organization. They are submitting to those who participated in the November town meeting a proposal for the creation of an advisory committee of a hundred persons, representing the 30 towns in the Hartford area. It is anticipated that the advisory committee, when organized, will work for passage of legislation to create a permanent regional council.

N.E. Illinois Planning Agency Prepares Aids for Localities

A two-year project to provide a series of local planning aids has been completed by the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission; they are based upon the most recent Illinois planning legislation.

Included are model ordinances for establishing a planning department, planning commission, and planning and development department; preparation of a comprehensive plan; and adoption of an official map and standards. Other aids provide a suggested county planning commission resolution, a flood damage prevention ordinance, a handbook on annexation and incorporation, and a guide for intercommunity councils.

COG Assessed

An analysis of the first seven years of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments has been prepared by Royce Hanson, a member of the faculty of American University and the Washington Center for Metropolitan Studies. The title of the study is *The Politics of Metropolitan Cooperation: Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments* (the center, 1726 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D. C. 20006, 1964, 83 pages, \$2.00). The study reviews the problems and potential of cooperation among governmental units as a vehicle for guiding the process of metropolitan policy development and decision-making as in the Washington area.

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the hearts and the control of individual citizens. Through its provisions for effective state and local government, Michigan's new constitution is an important example of what can be done to halt the dangerous trend to centralism. It is an example of aroused and informed citizenship. But in Michigan it took a crisis to arouse the citizens to build the needed coalition. The problem is how to build a coalition to secure action before an emergency arises.

I believe the answer lies in strengthening our two-party system. Both parties must be the vehicles for citizens in the discharge of their responsibilities. We also need a continuous national coalition of citizen groups dedicated to reforming state constitutions and strengthening programs of state and local government. I know the efforts of the National Municipal League are toward these goals. The league should take the lead in this coalition.

Citizens, informed and organized for reform, can be the most powerful force on earth. The future of the states and the federal system depends upon such reform. The future of local self-government, of individual freedom and responsibility depends upon it. The future of the nation depends upon it.

With all my heart I urge citizens to join in a crusade to remove the obstacles to effective state and local governments as one essential step in keeping our people free and our country strong.