



The End of Big Government... But an Epochal Opportunity for Local Government?

By Shayne Kavanagh



The End of Big

Nicco Mele

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In *The End of Big*, Nicco Mele explores the impact of what he calls the “radical connectivity” created by mobile technology and social networking. He points out that these technologies empower the individual to the detriment of big institutions, perhaps even leading to their demise (hence the title of the book). *The End of Big* starts with a brief history of modern information and communications technology because Mele believes that the creators of these technologies subscribed to belief systems of radical individualism, which then influenced the design of the technologies.

EXPLORING IMPLICATIONS

Mele explores some of the implications of these design choices. For example, new online groups can be created anywhere, at any time, for any purpose. Furthermore, the power of a social network grows exponentially as more nodes join the network, and modern technology has reduced the cost adding more nodes to, effectively, zero. To illustrate, consider the “phone tree,” which was a means of networking before the advent of modern communication technologies. Compare the time and energy needed to make that network operational, compared to what it would take for similar number of people to communicate via e-mail. One of the most insidious effects

of how easy it is to form groups is that people can more easily opt into homogenous groups, thereby strengthening the sense of identity and connection within these groups and weakening the sense of identification with other social entities (e.g., fellow citizens of the political jurisdiction).

Mele then goes on to explore the implication of these phenomena for a variety of political, entertainment-based, higher education, and corporate institutions. Perhaps of greatest interest to *Government Finance Review* readers is the implication for democratic governance and local government.

HOW GOVERNMENT FITS IN

Just like all of the other “big” institutions covered in Mele’s book, traditional government is being upended by radical connectivity. New political groups organize and make their views known through the policymaking process, public officials are inundated with citizen input over social media, and, in some cases, citizens may even take direct action (e.g., violent protest, private service organizations). Direct action might be the most worrisome of these forces because, in some cases, it has the potential to directly threaten the legitimacy of democratically elected government.

In this environment, Mele contends, local governments need to do far more than just be savvy about social media. Local leaders must be able to articulate a vision and values, and show how decisions are made in accordance with these values. When the bottom-up energy created by radical connectivity is paired with this kind of engaged leadership, the results are potentially transformational.

However, leaders cannot simply declare a vision and values expect the community to follow. Rather, establishing a vision and values represents an opportunity, as Mele puts it, to engage the community in “a dialogue about taking control of our destinies again and remaking Big Government. We need to figure out collectively what our values are, how they relate to concrete priorities, and how a revamped government could best deliver on those priorities working for the common good instead of special interests. Our government today is truly in need of an update that acknowledges 21st century realities and capabilities. If we want to continue living in a prosperous, safe, thriving democracy, we need to start talking about the government we need and want and then take steps to make it a reality.”

Having these conversations is especially important because radical connectivity has eroded our sense of citizenship and belonging to a larger society. Instead, we have digital narcissism, where personalization and filter technologies create a virtual echo chamber. Homogenization results in polarization. Heterogeneity brings moderation.

Mele believes that local government is particularly well-placed to lead this renewal of our sense of civic solidarity and community. Federal and state governments, as the ultimate “big” governments, are paralyzed by the forces unleashed by radical connectivity.

Local government finance officers, in particular, have an indispensable role. Mele points out that the budget is a government’s most important policy document. So, if local government leaders are to facilitate a community conversation about community values and the resulting government priorities, that conversation much necessarily include the budget. Mele believes that this work is a prerequisite to any technical innovations having a positive impact on the community.

The role of the professional public manager does not end with the budget. In addition to exercising a new and refined style of leadership, local governments must build new institutions that take advantage of the power offered by radical connectivity while mitigating the drawbacks.

For example, “open government” and “open data” promise opportunities for private citizens to develop applications that make use of this data. While many of these applications have produced value for the public, Mele points out that there are downsides. For example, development tends to follow a “scratch your own itch” path, which means that the applications that are developed tend to meet the needs of people like the developer (typically well-educated and relatively affluent). This leaves out potentially large segments of the population, contributing to greater inequali-

ty in government service provision (i.e., the affluent and educated have their problems solved, while others don’t). Well-designed government institutions will have processes and policies that maintain equity and that hold accountable the new the power centers created by open data.

Finance officers must also design processes that use radical connectivity to engage citizens from across the social spectrum. These processes must also provide the right mix of accountability and flexibility for public officials, so they can be effective leaders while maintaining the trust of the public.

CONCLUSIONS

In closing his argument for reforming big government, Mele references Alexis de Tocqueville, who observed that when Americans faced a problem, they would call a local meeting and figure out a solution, and that local politics was a central part of the life of most Americans. Of course, this is not the case today. But empowering individuals through radical connectivity opens up new possibilities for local government at a time when our politics have become extremely divisive and trust in government has hit an all-time low. As Mele says, “We need to imagine — and bring into being — new processes, new institutions, that on the one hand recognize the core values of our country’s founding but by the same token take advantage of the radical connectivity that is a reality of the digital age.” ■

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