



Progressive Thinking: Ten Possible Futures for Public & Community Services

Learning and unlearning coronavirus lessons

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Anyone who thinks that the state's role will "inevitably" change post-coronavirus is probably wrong. Government's reach into our lives has suddenly expanded, it is true. But this could easily be portrayed as negative, because authoritarian, or temporary, because unaffordable in the long term. So change will have to be fought for, and the exact shape of that change will need careful thought. Nonetheless, we can combine pre-existing ideas about the state's role with specific lessons from the crisis to create a vision for a more active, dynamic and resilient kind of government.

Even before coronavirus, alternative visions were emerging from the work of several thinkers. Oxford economist Kate Raworth's 'doughnut economics' (see picture) suggests humanity needs to land in the safe space represented by the flesh of the doughnut, where human development is balanced with environmental protection. Undershooting into the hole of the doughnut would represent insufficient human development; overshooting into the space beyond it would represent environmental degradation.

This provides an overarching role for government in balancing these two core demands, because it is clear that people acting by themselves – or in markets – will not get that balance right. Mass extinction of species, runaway climate change and widening inequalities are all evidence of that. Coronavirus rams home that lesson: its ultimate cause is our economically-driven incursions into the virgin rainforests where such diseases spread amongst animals. Covid-19 is a symbol of a world out of balance. Yet balancing competing demands has always been at the core of the state's role, ever since the early modern philosopher Thomas Hobbes suggested it was needed to stop "warre of every one against every one".

The human development that Raworth envisages can, in turn, be guided by philosopher Amartya Sen's vision of well-being, in which everyone has the resources for a flourishing existence and can lead lives "they have reason to value". New Zealand's 'well-being government' is so far just a skeleton, but it holds promise: pursuing holistic well-being, the whole wide range of things that humans truly need to flourish, gives governments far stronger grounds to act than, say, the simple pursuit of GDP. Governments can't guarantee that people will flourish, but they can provide the foundations. If coronavirus gives us mass unemployment, we will need government to marshal resources on an equally grand scale, doing all it can to provide retraining, subsidised part-time work and generous welfare support for as long as people require it.

Pursuing well-being for all also requires us to be attentive to inequality, something that coronavirus exposes – and could exacerbate. Without strong government action, economic crises will always hit the poor hardest, while the rich can escape relatively unhurt. Coronavirus reminds us of government's core role in redressing the inequalities left to us by luck and the market. As the French economist Thomas Piketty has shown, the natural tendency of Western societies is for accumulated



wealth to grow more quickly than people can generate fortunes by working; this leads to rampant inequality.

Only government action, in the form of taxes and other ways to share resources, can avert a return to Victorian-style imbalances of wealth. And the crisis has shown just how rapidly the state can act on inequality. It turns out that governments around the world *can* double benefits, *can* house the homeless, *can* build hospitals quickly. These actions aren't guaranteed to last: they can plausibly be dismissed as emergency measures by those who oppose active government. But their memory can be kept alive; we can argue that such measures should be adopted and extended. And if the state of the public finances is held up as an objection, we can argue for the slow and sensible paying down of debt – Britain only paid off the last of its World War II debts in 2006 – while funding social measures through taxes on wealthy households largely unscathed by the crisis.

How should the state pursue such goals? Confidently and dynamically, suggests Marianna Mazzucato, author of the groundbreaking *The Entrepreneurial State* and one of the world's most sought-after economists. The initial breakthroughs behind new drugs, Mazzucato shows, are often made in public laboratories; the 12 key technologies on which the smartphone relies were all developed or funded by the public sector. By picking important public "missions", like Germany's massive 1990s shift to renewable energy, governments can shape markets, create new ones, and do much of the patient work that underpins innovation. They are wealth creators.

Closer to home there are clear lessons for government post-coronavirus. Māori have, in declaring rāhui and manning checkpoints, exercised tino rangatiratanga in striking ways. But Mihingarangi Forbes and others have noted that Māori have largely been recipients of the disaster response, not the drivers of it. "Once again," [Forbes wrote](#), "the actions of the government have been more paternalistic than ... partnership." We will all have to support Māori in arguing for a future that holds more autonomy and less paternalism.

Central to the covid-19 fight have been our frontline public sector workers, two-thirds of them women. Surely the calls for them to be better paid, and more adequately staffed, will now be much harder to resist. We have seen public services more generally, especially in health, perform wonders during this crisis. But we have also seen how badly stretched those services were – and in some cases, how poorly prepared they were for the pandemic.

So we will need to make the case for a far more resilient state: one that is better funded and has more reserves of 'fat' – such as ICU beds that normally sit empty – to be called on in times of crisis. As well as being resilient, this kind of government would, in the words of Victoria University's Jonathan Boston, be anticipatory, future-focussed. It would look ahead, scanning the horizon for creeping problems and hard-to-detect dangers, and prepare accordingly.

Not everything about this crisis will teach us the right lessons. The government's response has been successful precisely because it was so authoritarian. But crises are the exception not the rule, and in general we will need to argue for more deeply democratic government, one in which citizens are more directly involved in decision-making. This better answers the promise of democracy, which is that citizens should have a say over all the major decisions that affect them. It also delivers better



policies, because they are more closely informed by the reality of individuals' lives; it makes decisions feel more legitimate, since more people have genuinely participated in them; and it increases confidence in the whole system. In that sense, we will have to unlearn some of the lessons of coronavirus.

Still, the post-coronavirus vision is clear. We need government that is more active, more dynamic and more resilient. And at a time when our dependence on government has been laid bare, and every sector of society runs to the state for aid, the opportunity to make that case has never been greater.

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