

Small Group Brainstorming . . . What is Government?

If on Monday ten people were shipwrecked on a desert island, by Saturday they would probably have established some form of government. Government is simply the organization of people for common action. All societies have machinery for maintaining law and order, and getting things done.

Life without government would be difficult to imagine.

The seventeenth century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes compared it to a war of "every man against every man." In such a situation he wrote:

...there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently no culture of the earth, no navigation nor the use of commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building, no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time, no arts, no letters, no societies; and, which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.

It is one of man's greatest triumphs that he has solved the problem of the constant war of "every man against every man" by means of government. Among civilized peoples government does not exist merely to provide law and order, but that is its essential function. Without order nothing else is possible. Government provides the means by which people can accomplish work that the individual alone cannot possibly do alone.

At one time the function of government was restricted to such primary tasks as maintaining law and order, collecting taxes, and conducting foreign affairs and defense. Today there are few aspects of our lives that are not regulated or affected by government.

In forming their government, our shipwrecked islanders would have many choices.

They might agree to accept the rule of the most intelligent or the most beautiful, and make them king or queen. They might choose a leader by picking straws, or by a show of hands, or by a secret vote. The strongest might impose his will on the group by force, creating a dictatorship.

If they cannot agree among themselves on a common policy, the survivors might break into different groups. This would mean different governments, each with a different solution to common problems.

By the end of a week, the castaways probably would have a simple set of rules and regulations, something we might call a constitution. These rules would define the rights individual could enjoy, and the responsibilities they owed the group.

By the end of a year, this simple system would have become much more complex and there would undoubtedly be some arrangement for enforcing the rules.

Critical Thinking

Fully discuss the following questions with your small group, and be prepared to share your ideas with the whole class!

- 1) Discuss the following statement . . .

Government is a necessary part of modern life.

Survivor Island . . . OKM

- 2) If this class were a group of castaways, what sort of government would you wind up with?
- 3) Who would assume a leadership role? Why?
- 4) How would they become a leader? Why?
- 5) What would be the responsibilities of leadership?
- 6) What rights and responsibilities would be given to individuals?
- 7) How would individuals who refuse to assume these responsibilities be dealt with?