

Fiscal Irresponsibility: The leprosy of representative democracy

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In 1914, Paul Brand was born to British missionary parents in India. After receiving his higher education and medical training in Britain, he returned to India, where he became interested in treating leprosy. Leprosy, as you no doubt know, is a disease in which your fingers and toes gradually become shortened stubs. In biblical times the disease was greatly feared, so lepers were ostracized from society.

In the late 1800s, a Norwegian physician discovered that leprosy is caused by a bacterium, so it was natural to think that the bacterium caused the tissue damage that transformed fingers and toes into stubs. But in the 1900s, it was determined that the bacterium damaged nerves, and it was Paul Brand's brilliant insight that the problem lay in the loss of pain.

A person with leprosy doesn't feel pain sensation in their fingers and toes, so they injure them. For example, suppose that a piece of wood in a fire has burned to the point where it needs to be pushed further into the fire. If you or I were to reach down and grab it with our fingers and it was hot, we'd drop it instantly, wince in pain, and shake our fingers to quickly cool them. But a leper wouldn't feel the pain, so they would simply hold onto the wood, push it into the fire, and then let go. Paul Brand figured out that, due to the absence of pain sensation, lepers were injuring their finger tips and toes, and were thereby transforming them, bit-by-bit, into stubs.

In seeking to treat leprosy, Brand developed various methods of alerting a leper to situations that may cause injury, but to his dismay, these methods didn't work. Why didn't they work? Because a leper would turn off the alerting system for the convenience of doing what they wanted to do despite the injury that it would cause to their body.

It turns out that fiscal irresponsibility is a disease that is inherent in representative democracy — fiscal irresponsibility is the leprosy of representative democracy.

The reason is that a legislature can get gain without pain by simply voting itself more money, and this absence of pain makes it impossible for a legislature to properly limit its spending. After all, there are so many good things on which to spend money for the benefit of the people, as the myriad interest groups constantly remind every legislator. Imagine how your family would spend money if you could simply vote yourself more money. You would not only improve your own family life in desirable ways, you would also enjoy your ability to generously help people in need.

How can we cure the disease of fiscal irresponsibility — the leprosy of representative democracy?

In order to cure the disease we need to solve the problem of **gain without pain**. How can we do this? By preventing a legislature from voting itself more money. The people who earn the money and own the money must control the ability of the government to get their money. This will solve the problem because for the people the well-known adage is true: **no pain, no gain**. Your family can't simply vote itself more money; instead, your family members must earn money through work or investment. Hence, we cure the disease that is inherent in representative democracy with a focused use of direct democracy by giving the people direct control of the ability of the government to get their money.

As citizens of Washington State, we have a unique opportunity to see this theme at work because Washington is one of the 24 states that has an initiative process, and the citizens of Washington tend to elect fiscal liberals while also approving initiatives for fiscal restraint. This demonstrates that when the people can vote directly for measures of fiscal restraint, they tend to approve them.

Under **The People's Initiative**, the people will control a ceiling on government income+debt, with the ceiling expressed as a percentage of the income of the economy. This will allow government income to grow as the income of the economy grows. Only the people can change the ceiling, and they can lower it if they wish, thereby providing a means for reducing the cost of government through popular mandate. ***In this way, The People's Initiative will cure the leprosy of representative democracy.***