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Responsibilities of Citizenship During the Pandemic

A Column by Evan Barrett

March 30, 2020

As the death toll from the novel coronavirus rises, we are brutally faced with the reality that public policy directly affects the number of Americans and Montanans who are victimized by this modern plague. And also by the reality that, because of its nature, public policy is not always driven by cold hard facts, science and evidence, but is at least partially driven by politics. In some ways that is bad, but in other ways it is good and necessary.

This is a time when people are called upon to join the communal effort to “flatten the curve” of medical destruction and death, to help move us toward a more controlled medical situation in the face of having no “cure” for the silent viral enemy. Medical and public health leaders have been sounding the alarm bells and flashing red lights about the dangers of a pandemic since the Ebola crisis in 2014. Yet we are now coming to the realization that the United States has, at best, had a flat-footed response to the challenge, a response that is now leading to exponentially-rising numbers of both cases and deaths.

Writing this as I sit at home, cloistered off because at age 75 I am in such a high-risk category, I know I will be chastised for failure to fully and completely stand behind the actions of our federal leadership. I suspect I will be accused of betraying our country because we should all be “pulling together.” But in the fifty years I have been deeply involved in public policy I have learned that the duties of citizenship are steeped in the need for active engagement, not passivity – voicing our concerns rather than sitting in silence.

We as citizens have the right, even the responsibility, to demand that the leadership we have chosen rises to the task in front of us. In fact, that is almost a citizen’s duty in a democracy. We have the right to demand that our elected leaders be ahead of the curve, not behind the curve, especially when missing that curve means death for thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens. We have a right to demand that our elected leaders take advantage of the expertise we have developed in government with our tax dollars, rather than decrying that expertise as a “deep state” product with some conspiratorial agenda.

Political people shout “accountability” from the rooftops when it comes to the actions of individual citizens, especially those at the lower economic levels. Yet, those same political folk do not want the “accountability” lens focused on them. They suggest we should blindly fall in line behind a president or governor during times of crisis. But responsible citizenship calls upon us to not meekly line up behind bad direction in a crisis, but to insist upon fact-based decision-making that leads us in the right direction.

We citizens are not rats following a pied piper to the sea nor lemmings marching to the sea. We are citizens with a responsibility that goes beyond the ballot box to demanding performance (and accountability) from those we elect.

In saying that, our critical eye should not be blindly partisan. It needs to be shaped by values and the common good, by the facts of our situation. It needs to be based on rational thought and analysis not virulent political rhetoric or tribal thinking.

Criticism of the initial direction of our president has helped begin to bend the curve toward better public policy. If we are finally moving away from denial, delay and deflection as our direction, it is because citizens have been willing to criticize the bad direction. That is the way a democracy is supposed to work.

As citizens we are called upon to make shared sacrifices based upon the reality of our medical situation. Maintaining “social distance” - for some “social isolation” - is contrary to our active nature, yet it is necessary to keep the coronavirus crisis curve low. Do your part by practicing social distancing and other needed actions. And also, as citizens, contribute to the better good by critical thinking and active voicing of your concerns.

The country needs your thoughtful voice.

Evan Barrett lives in historic Uptown Butte after retiring following 47 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history videos who continues to write columns and commentaries and occasionally teaches Montana history.

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