

Trust Government, Not the Free Market

Guest post by Richard J. Maybury. Originally published in The Voluntaryist, June 1988.

All this talk about liberty is exciting, but let's get serious for a moment. The evidence shows clearly that liberty does not work. Many things are too important to be left to the whims of the free market. Imagine the chaos if our schools, postal system, Social Security, all other essential services were not provided by government.

This is the reasoning behind the need for government intervention. We cannot get along without it. We cannot trust the free market to provide our essential services. But does this reasoning stand up under close scrutiny?

What is the most essential service known to man? Is it schools? Social Security? Police? Roads?

Consider clocks. Is there anything more important than the service they provide?

Imagine a world without clocks. Imagine trying to run a factory with assembly line workers straggling in at all hours of the day.

Imagine a busy airport without clocks. Without the ability to schedule arrivals at evenly spaced intervals, planes short on fuel would enter the landing pattern and find no room on the runways.

Imagine railroads without clocks. Imagine two trains without schedules accidentally converging on an intersection at the same moment.

Imagine giant oil tankers maneuvering in shallow waters without clocks - without the means to predict accurately the tides.

Neither the Industrial Revolution nor the prosperity created by it were possible until clocks had been invented. In a civilization as advanced as ours, the single most important requirement may well be good timing.

Without the ability to tell time, our newspapers, radio, and TV stations would be unable to schedule their activities to meet deadlines. Schools would be unable to conduct classes. Business meetings, appointments and planning would be impossible.

Our civilization would collapse, because we would not be able organize ourselves.

Yet organization does occur and our civilization does work because we are able to tell time. In fact, we are able to tell time very effectively.

On my wrist is an electronic digital watch. A few years ago such watches cost \$200. Today you can get them for \$20. Despite their low cost and incredible complexity, they are highly accurate.

They are provided by free enterprise.

But suppose they were not provided by free enterprise. Suppose instead that timekeeping were considered too important to be left to the “whims of the free market.” What would a digital watch be like if it were a public service produced by government?

Judging by everything else government does, a watch would cost a year’s wages and be the size and weight of a manhole cover. It would always run at least six hours slow except when it were running backwards.

If timekeeping were a public service, the DOT (Department of Time) would consume 20 billion tax dollars per year and its army of bureaucrats would regulate every facet of watch production and timekeeping. But no one would question the need for the DOT. After all, there has to be some control, doesn’t there?

Imagine the chaos if we had no laws requiring everyone’s watch to be set accurately. Factories could not operate. Schools would close. Airlines would crash. Obviously a \$10,000 fine and a year in prison are reasonable penalties for having your watch set wrong.

That’s an optimistic assessment of government timekeeping. Realistically, the situation would be a modern version of the one prevailing during the Middle Ages in Europe.

In medieval Europe, timekeeping really was considered too important for the free market. Small personal clocks were available, but government collected huge amounts of tax money to build giant clock towers in the centers of towns.

In Lyons, France, for instance, officials wanted a “great clock whose strokes could be heard by all citizens in all parts of the town. If such a clock were to be made, more merchants would come to the fairs, the citizens would be very consoled, cheerful and happy, and would lead a more orderly life.” We still see these kinds of clock towers all over Europe. Big Ben was modeled after them.

If in today’s world timekeeping were still considered too important for the free market, individualized timekeeping could even be illegal, no wristwatch, alarm clock, or other timepiece could be privately owned because individuals could never be trusted to govern their own affairs. They might set their clocks wrong.

To make sure everyone was using the correct time, the DOT would subsidize and control the production of one clock for each community. Following the medieval pattern, each

clock would be perched atop a mile-high tower in the center of the city and would be the size of the Queen Mary. It would loom over the city like a storm cloud. The ticking would sound like a pile driver.

People would complain about the inconvenience of having to look out their windows whenever they wanted to know the time, so each clock would also be equipped with a chime ringing every fifteen minutes, as in medieval Europe. To be heard everywhere in the city, the chime would be loud enough to reverberate like a thunderclap, rattling doors and windows for miles around. Every fifteen minutes. All day and all night long.

But no one would question the need for this monstrously expensive torture device because individualized timekeeping would not exist, so no one would believe it could exist. Any lunatic who suggested the free market could provide each individual with a highly accurate clock small enough to be worn on the wrist would be laughed out of town. Obviously, everyone would exclaim, even if such a futuristic gadget could be invented, it would cost a fortune; and besides, everyone would have his watch set differently - there would be chaos.

Everybody knows liberty does not work. Essential services must be provided by government.