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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## THE FORGOTTEN ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

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*Governments today prioritise the safety of citizens over inspiring them. But people everywhere and at all times have sought more to life than merely more of it. The power of belief in a cause or a project may be a more effective way of ensuring social resilience than merely focusing on security.*

IN HIS FAMOUS tome ‘*On Liberty*’ of 1859, the Enlightenment philosopher John Stuart Mill concluded that “*a State which dwarfs its men ... will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished*”.

The proper role, composition and functioning of the State has preoccupied scholars from the time of Plato and Cicero, through Machiavelli and Hobbes, to Rousseau and Marx, right down to the present day. Understandably, the establishment of order was often highlighted as the primary task of government. It is no different today when protecting citizens from the threat of terrorism, influenza, climate change or economic uncertainty are so central.

### Looking for Meaning in Life

But history suggests that what truly motivates people goes beyond their security. The United States of America was famously immortalised by Francis Scott Key in his poem of 1814 that went on to be the national anthem as ‘*the land of the free*’, not ‘*the land of the safe*’.

People, from Spartacus and beyond, in all places and at all times, have been prepared to risk it all, in order to be free. We do not just *live* our lives – as animals do – we *lead* them. And we do not, accordingly, always take kindly to those who, for whatever benevolent intentions, seek to impose their model of how life should be.

Of course, in a democracy, those politicians who may wish to assert such views are, ultimately, held accountable by the people. But neither they, nor the officials they task with introducing and implementing their visions, can ever afford to take this role lightly. The real art of leadership is to

ensure that others follow. Accordingly, winning hearts and minds is as important in the domestic arena as it is in resolving conflicts elsewhere. But – as indicated above – it is increasingly evident that, for the vast majority, the assurance that government is keeping them safe may not be enough to keep them on-side. People look for meaning to life, not just more of it.

### **Need to Inspire, not Just to Protect**

The forgotten role of government today is to inspire people, not simply to protect them. In an age marked by the absence of belief in secular ideals, nothing could be more vital. People who believe in a cause or project are far more effective agents of it than those who are coerced or corralled. But to benefit from this power of conviction there needs to be a concomitant intellectual, or ideological, engagement that is often absent today.

No State – not even a small island nation – can hope to command and control every action and interaction of its citizens. To do so would lead to paralysis. Indeed, those countries that tried in the last century collapsed from within, as people withdrew their energies and enthusiasms from the projects they were supposed to be supporting. Nothing is guaranteed to accelerate complacency and cynicism faster than being told what to do whilst remaining detached or disengaged.

In fact, in almost all societies today, individuals increasingly encounter each other as free and autonomous agents of their own volition. They enter into contracts – of employment, of exchange and of marriage – not at the point of a gun, but largely through choice, irrespective of the limitations of their circumstances. It is precisely these, freely-willed and freely-entered into, social relations, which oil the complex relations of nations today, and keep them, not just working, but thriving. But, in order to do so, individuals need to have a sense of their own potential, as well as that of society, through the prism of having had their imaginations captivated or inspired towards achieving particular goals.

### **Role of Leadership**

Unfortunately, such goals for society today are most notable by their absence. At the time of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century – that period which generated the sense of ourselves as free, equal and autonomous agents, that we benefit from today – there was little need to spell out the need for inspiration. The tremendous changes and upheavals that occurred then were inspiring enough. They led a young Wordsworth to write: “*Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive. But to be young was very heaven!*”

Today however, in a more quiescent period – one not marked primarily by the removal of Kings or concerted challenges to the domination of religious dogma – there may be a need to be more conscious about the need to inspire the citizenry. Ours has been cited as an age of anxiety, or a culture of fear. But where are the ideas and ideals capable of leading us beyond our narrow existential concern for our own well-being and towards a broader appreciation of the potential of the collective human project?

A recent editorial in The Straits Times managed to capture the requisite spirit (*‘Small step for US, giant leap for Asia’* – 22 July). Reflecting as to the demise of the US-led space race on the 40th anniversary of the moon landings, it argued: “*Given America’s dithering, it behooves many Asian countries to replicate the spirit of 1969*”. It then concluded that, far from being a diversion of resources, such adventures exemplified the human spirit and could galvanise a nation.

The counter-position, so often made in our risk-averse times, between freedom and security is a false one. Real security can only ever emerge from being free and not the other way around. Sadly today, it appears that the maxim *‘better safe than sorry’* dominates over that of *‘nothing ventured, nothing gained’*.

It remains to be seen whether the future will be captured by those who would instill absolute safety first, in advance of those who understand the need to inspire a nation in order to achieve great things.

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