As With King George's Colonial Governors, EFM's Breach the Social Compact

Brendan T Beery
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From the Mayflower Compact to the U.S. Constitution, the charters we Americans have created to structure the relationship between citizens and government have reflected what John Locke called the social compact. In our national tradition, the people are sovereign; all power resides in the people, and the state possesses only those powers that the people have resigned to it for the common good.

This tradition is at least partly responsible for the constitutional guarantee that all states will abide a republican form of government. In the constitutional sense, small-r republican means representative. The social compact only works if those who govern come from the people; they cannot be superimposed from on high.

This was the most fundamental problem with the colonial governors appointed by King George III before the American Revolution. The people of the colonies did not elect them; rather, they were appointed by a sovereign from afar and superimposed on the people of the colonies without any regard for their local interests. Since the colonial governors had no compact with the local colonists, the colonists had ceded none of their own authority to the governors. The power those governors exercised over their subjects did violence to nascent American values that have since come to form the bedrock of our democracy.

Not to be outdone by King George III, Rick Snyder, sought and received statutory authority from big-R Republican legislators, to give "emergency financial managers" far more power. In Benton Harbor, once the new law took effect, Emergency Manager Joseph L. Harris set about dispensing with elected organs of the municipal government there with impressive dispatch.
Time will tell where the next bloodless state invasion of local government will come, but it is no exaggeration to say that Snyder and his ilk have unleashed on this state the 21st Century's analog to King George's colonial governors. This is an affront not only to the Constitution but to the uniquely American notion of the social compact that undergirds the Constitution's promises to American citizens.

History has proved that when state interests are married to any other interests than the interests of the people, the civic results are catastrophic. Thomas Paine, by some measures our most brilliant forefather, wrote that all governments throughout history have derived their authority from one of three places: the people, the powerful or the church. When government derives its authority from the people, it is well suited to serve the interests of those to whom it is accountable. The marriage of church and state, on the other hand, creates what Paine called "a sort of mule-animal, capable only of destroying." The third kind of government, appointed by the rich and powerful (an aristocracy, if you will), results inevitably in oligarchy.

We see in the modern incarnation of the Republican Party a grotesque assault on American tradition by some hybrid political creature that is half fundamentalist religion and half corporate money. Our forefathers were prescient enough to foresee the perils of theocracy and aristocracy, but never could they have imagined the toxic combustible sludge that the admixture of both has produced in this decade.

Nothing better illuminates what modern Republicanism has wrought on our way of life than Snyder's mutant mule-animal, the newly empowered emergency financial manager. It is undemocratic, unrepublican, and un-American. Unless it comes before a Republican judge sympathetic to the religious and moneyminded interests that spawned it, it will soon also be held unconstitutional.

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