

When I Become King

Life's good except for a few things that get my goat. Most of the time I figure that life's too short to bother with them, but sometimes--today for instance--I get the bug to put things right. Under such circumstances, I lapse back into my "When I'm king," mode where I ("We" is actually correct) intend redress all grievances and overcome bumbling bureaucratic absurdities. A sampling of routine decrees might include:

- Vandals, mass murderers, IRS employees, drivers who whiz along in the fast lane until making a last-ditch dive onto an off-ramp, cash-only line patrons who wait until they're rung up before pulling out coupons and a checkbook, purse-snatchers, after-dinner speakers, and ambulance-chasers of any stripe will be shown the error of their ways;
- People who consider themselves under-employed are free to leave;
- Authors of bills in Congress or state legislatures that end up costing the taxpayers more than \$1,000 have to count the money out in nothing larger than \$100 bills;
- Disputes between nations will be settled by their legitimate leaders who will be made to strip naked and mud-wrestle on live TV;
- Etceteras.

The truth is I don't plan to do much of anything as king--my reign will commence at 8:00 a.m. followed eight hours later by my abdication--other than remind people that it's all right to get out there and head off problems rather than wait for those on high to do something. If we do nothing more that dispel the myth that we're helpless without today's batch of movers-and-shakers, we'll have at least 20 years of clear sailing before the current coven of masters can remobilize. My first and only proclamation to my eager subjects will be, "You know what needs to be done. Just do your part and leave others alone to do theirs." What an awesome thought to unleash right at the turn of the century. I figure 30 minutes of spirited activity after decades of waiting for our leaders to grace us with answers should be more than ample time to put us back on the fast track. My latest urge began when I read in one newspaper article about how a state agency's waste-tracking database is so fouled up that its information cannot be used effectively in regulatory matters, followed immediately by another in which an MSW management authority intends to commit \$33 million to cure a \$2 million problem.

Of course I don't really want to be king--too many crazies out there looking to become famous, for starters--but the idea has merit when you consider how much time and effort is wasted in the assumption that the efforts of our elected officials and career-motivated administrators are going to translate to something for us to hang our hats on. For starters, let's understand that it's not their fault. Their effectiveness is not governed by capability, character, or agenda, but rather by what they and we assume their job to be. According to popular mythology there was a time when administrators and elected officials were considered to be "civil servants," responsible to the public for the orderly and effective conduct of civic affairs. The notion seems a little quaint in this day and age when selflessness is little match for notoriety, or when most administrators are so far removed from where the action is, there is little chance they will be called to account, however deep their penchant for fiasco.

This all makes sense to me because I've found myself content on plenty of occasions to tell others what to do and how to do it if (1) they are willing to listen and (2) they are able to accept the notion--mistaken to the core--that I know something they don't. Also, having stood for election (school board) and won, I am familiar with the curious transformation that takes place in your psyche (after being reduced to a blubbing wimp awaiting the ballot count) because you happen to have gotten one more vote than the next guy. "It's a mandate," you tell yourself. "After all, how can I be wrong? I've been elected, haven't I?" So what does this tell us about ourselves and what we can and should do?

Stopping the Buck

There's little to be done to stop people upstream from doing what they're used to doing...particularly once they've had the opportunity to commit to a course of action. If you're dealing with a town council that's just been introduced to host fees by ambassadors from Brand-W and you don't favor the rest of the company's waste management agenda, your best chance of success lies in launching a preemptive strike of your own before the board comes to a decision. It's risky, no doubt, but the alternative is to acquiesce or wait to mount some sort of a rear-guard action, neither of which is likely to prove career enhancing, much less satisfying. Effective downstream dealings can be even more risky. First you have to carve out fiefdoms from your territory and deed them over to your subordinates. Next you must appoint the stewards for each and provide adequate guidance and support to help them succeed rather than fall on their swords. Finally--this is the doozie--you must resist the almost-overwhelming temptation to meddle, adhering to the injunction that if you can't touch it, or mold it, or do something that makes it better than anyone could possibly have imagined, then you ought not to monkey with it...a task fit for saints not kings.

So there it is. Buck stopping is our business. The trick is to keep it from getting out of somebody's pocket in the first place.