

An American Approach to Government Reform

By John Stuart Edwards

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My fellow Americans.

To be better citizens and informed stewards of our government, we must improve our skills so we can lead our nation through the next century and beyond. We need to think and innovate more, and we need to communicate and collaborate more effectively as a nation.

I am not a politician, comedian, psychic, actor, pundit, or expert in any particular area of government. I'm just a 47 year old American citizen who is trying to take care of my family and do the right thing. I am writing this article because I don't know what else to do. All I know is that I believe in America, I believe in Americans, and I believe in the American Dream. The same dream that my parents taught me and the one that I learned about in school. The dream that says I can do anything I want to do if I work hard and am willing to sacrifice.

My dream today is that we come together as one nation. I offer that we start by considering the original pledge of allegiance from 1892, "I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands: one Nation indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all."

We have to start somewhere America, so can we agree to be indivisible?

If we can agree not to divide ourselves as a nation, then let us please consider another challenge facing us today. We have made our government too complex. I read the U.S. Constitution again recently, the charter for our country. It is simple and it makes sense to me. Now look at what we did with it over the past two centuries. Federal regulations and the tax code today touch every American and both are too complex and broken. If the regulations and tax code don't serve us, then they need to be fixed.

A quick Google search tells me that our U.S. Constitution has 4400 WORDS and the tax code has more than 10 times as many pages. I have no idea how many pages of regulations we have in our government, but my guess is that there are more than needed to make it work for us. The fact that we are beginning a major bail out of financial institutions that probably has many volumes of regulations is perhaps some evidence that quantity of regulation does not necessarily equal quality. With so many financial regulations already, we probably do not need more regulations for the financial industry; we just need regulations that are simple and make sense to the American people.

For example, I can understand a rule that says you have to know how much something you own is worth in the marketplace. Our income tax code requires that I know that rule when I donate to charity or sell something for profit or loss as a small business owner. If I don't follow that rule, then I hear from the IRS - even if it is not my mistake, and they make me pay just like any other American taxpayer. If we don't have the money, then we get into trouble. To pay our government, some Americans have to cash in their retirement savings, sell a car, lose a home to foreclosure, and default on loan obligations they made which takes away our pride and tarnishes our honor.

What I cannot understand is how major financial institutions were not required to do the very same thing that every American citizen is required to do under the law, and why the American taxpayer has to be accountable and suffer for their bad behavior. Perhaps it is too complicated for me to understand as a citizen and I should just agree to go along. But if it is too complicated for most other Americans too, then I believe this is a symptom of a larger problem. All Americans don't have to agree on everything our government does, but we do have an obligation under our Constitution to understand what our government is doing.

I think we need to consider and reflect on what our nation's founders were telling us as we tackle this latest financial crisis and begin to address the many other problems we face as a nation. In all the words in our Constitution, one important theme that I see is that our founders strived for transparency in our government by devising the shortest written Constitution of any major government in the world. By making it more complex over the last two centuries through legislation, the courts, and our government departments, we, as stewards of our country have drifted from the principle of transparency and we need to get back there.

Can we agree that we need to create transparency in our government? If so, let's start talking about how we can do it.

Americans agree that there are sixty seconds in a minute, sixty minutes in an hour, and 24 hours in a day. We believe that the moon orbits the earth in about 28 days and we measure a calendar year using 12 months. Most companies report their results every three months called a quarter, and after four quarters companies are expected to report the results of their past fiscal year and future plans. We expect all these things to happen and we can measure them. If something does not happen that we expect or something we did not expect happens, then we know we might have a problem and we will have to work together to fix it. If there was negligence or incompetence, then we punish the offenders.

Can we agree that the American people need to set measurable expectations for our government that allow us to see problems and hold our elected officials accountable?

Our politicians won't say this so I will. All our problems with our government are our fault – the fault of the American people. We have been asleep at the voting booth. We have elected officials to serve as our leaders and representatives and we are shocked

when they do not measure up. It is our problem, we created it, and we have to solve it. Perhaps we have not expected much good out of our government. We have accepted the way it regulates, the way it spends our money, the way it taxes us, the way it prioritizes our needs, and we just sit back and we hope someone is interested enough to fight for us and do what's right. Or we hope that some small group will be loud and rich enough to carry our cause.

Can we agree that hope is not enough collateral to expect change? Can we agree that if we are going to have real change that we have to be able to measure it?

What solution makes sense for the American people? If we can't understand why we do something or don't do something as a people, then maybe we need to pay a little more attention to our government. What I prescribe here is a simple approach, one that may be too simple for our Washington bureaucrats but one that I believe many Americans can understand and support so we can quickly create greater transparency across our government enterprise. If we keep it simple and transparent, we can succeed. Like our pledge to be indivisible, we have to start somewhere America, so why can't we start here?

A Baseline Report to the American People

Keep it simple. We need to establish some understandable context for our government that allows us as a nation to collectively think and innovate. We need a fuse to ignite participation across our nation not just for the latest crisis, but to start that long journey of national self examination and knowledge that is built from a shared understanding of what our government does, and then on questions and answers that build our knowledge and a new citizenship for every American. We need to be free to identify and discuss our problems and start the process of working through them openly, being limited only by our imagination and courage. We need to simplify and understand what our government does.

All long journeys start someplace, and here is what I propose to get us started.

First, require every federal government department starting at the cabinet level to provide a report that answers the following questions. Require that each cabinet head publish a new report annually under their signature, no later than the anniversary of the first report which should be due within 30 days of the State of the Union each year. Post all these reports on the Internet for everyone to see immediately, and require that they be submitted using 4400 words or less, just like our Constitution. Link these reports prominently to the IRS website and every federal website in the entire government where a citizen might interact so they are easy to find

All initial reports should be limited to answering five fundamental questions.

1. What is your mission?
2. What is your vision?

and for each of the following:

- Lead and manage
 - Organize and assign resources
 - Execute policy
 - Perform processes
 - Use enabling technologies
3. How do you (for each item above) now?
 4. How did your department (for each item above) 2 years ago?
 5. How does your department plan to (for each item above) in 2 years?

Place the name of the department at the top of the first page and number each page. If the department struggles with these questions or has to make up answers, then that absence of knowledge or the weakness of each response will tell Americans a lot. It will explain our loss of confidence or show us why we should be confident. This is what the Baseline Report to the American People is supposed to show us, now let's discuss how it will be used.

Provide quarterly progress reports through High Tech - High Touch Town Hall meetings in all 50 states.

American citizens can create transparency by being offered substantive opportunities to communicate and collaborate in their homes, localities, and state institutions with Washington officials both in person and using available technologies. Our mobile phones, televisions, and the Internet have given us a gift of communication and collaboration our founders never could imagine possible. Let us make America better by using all enabling technologies in our homes, schools, and communities in new and creative ways to improve communication and collaboration across our nation. Let us remove all unnecessary barriers to citizen participation and involvement by investing wisely in interoperable solutions and capabilities that ensure every American has a chance to participate in creating transparency of our government. If we are wise, investments to improve our country here can also serve our economy as well. There is no problem we cannot solve together.

To get started, we should exploit all available capabilities across all technologies simultaneously to connect our government through volunteers, community service, and philanthropy for each initial federal report to spontaneously and rapidly create a broad citizen network. There are so many possibilities beyond online blogs and forums, websites, videos, television broadcasts, and mobile messaging and alerts; conducting public meetings and broadcasts; working groups and think tanks. Each cabinet level department head should be accountable for explaining their mission to the public, describing their governance, networks and affiliations, and how they are changing or

planning to change our government to serve the public. They need to explain the problems we are facing as a nation and allow the full power of our citizens to participate, provide immediate feedback, and be informed. The public can participate real time in polling and other data collection to ensure we are focused on the right priorities and issues at the right time. This not a modification to what our founders sought, this is simply transparency of our government inside a modern democracy.

My dream is that we come together as one nation and become better citizens and informed stewards of our government. I believe that all Americans are accountable for our government's performance and results. We don't have to agree with everything our government does. But if we can agree to not be divided anymore and take responsibility for what our government does or does not do as a nation, then perhaps we can also agree to unite by sharing a common goal to begin creating transparency of our government by starting with the Baseline Report to the American People. By emphasizing opportunities for communication and collaboration through all available channels, we can foster a solid foundation for renewed citizenship of transparent government that serves as a springboard to a new economy in America and the rest of the world.

If we start today, together we can begin to imagine where our nation and the world will be in 100 years and beyond. And that dream can be our American Dream, one we created together that all Americans can believe in and share.

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