As the last century came to a close, and the new century began, it seemed that many had lost faith in the capacity of government – perhaps particularly democratic government – to improve the individual and collective conditions in which individuals lived out their lives. This was true in the relatively well developed democratic states of Europe, America, and the Commonwealth (some of whose leaders denied the existence of our collective life as an interdependent society, and decried government as the problem not the solution to any problems that individuals or collectives living in that non-society might think they have!), but equally in developing countries and liberalizing states throughout the world.

To some degree, this was ironic since it was liberal democratic states that had defeated totalitarianism of both the right and the left, and seemed to have paved the way for dramatic gains in the economic, social, and political conditions throughout the world.

Despite the accomplishments, the role of government as a critical positive influence on economic, social, and political life was cavalierly dismissed. It was the strength of liberal *economic* institutions, not liberal political culture rooted in strong civil societies, nor liberal governmental processes that enabled citizens from all parts of the society to call on government for help when they had an idea for how society could be improved by satisfying individual wants that had been beyond reach for many, meeting individual needs that had long seemed beyond the capacity of both individuals and government acting for society as a whole to satisfy, and vindicating rights that had long been degraded by economic, social, and political oppression that should be credited with whatever economic, social, and political improvements had occurred.

In this spirit, many argued for cutting back significantly on the size and scope of government, and its influence on individual and social life. It was time to turn the right and the responsibility for deciding how each of us was to live our life back to each of us as individuals, or as members of voluntarily chosen communities. It was important that we hold onto our hard earned money so that each of us could decide what we wanted to spend our money on rather than have the government decide how to spend it. It was important that we fight against government efforts to regulate private business practices, or to force individuals to accept conduct in others that particular individuals found offensive. Individualism and freedom had to be advanced against the corrosive trends of collective social control found, and the dependence producing effects of an economic and social safety net.

The debate over the proper size and scope of government is a proper matter for political discourse. The question of what portion of our lives we want to live in recognition that we live in an interdependent world that requires us to be mindful of the wants, needs, and rights of others in our world, and what portion we can best live as individuals attending to our own intersts and living in accord with our own more or less idiosyncratic ideas of what constitutes a good and virtuous life. But