

The Role of Public Institutions in Ensuring Social Well-Being

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In the last several decades, debates around the globe have intensified about the place of governments in safeguarding the welfare of their people. On one end of the spectrum have been those arguing that the state's role in this enterprise should be absolute. They would say that, as the ultimate representative of the people, public institutions bear full responsibility to create universal systems to meet all social needs, and that leaving such concerns to the private and non-governmental realm can only result in piecemeal programming, profiteering from essential services, and people falling through the cracks. On the other end of the spectrum are those that have argued that government is inevitably inefficient, corrupt, and prone to stifling the transformative ingenuity generated by market forces, the freedom of altruistic individual initiative, and the responsiveness of grassroots community action. As such, the needs of society, they would say, can be best met by minimizing the size and scope of government, with an understanding that this leads to robust economic growth and the flourishing of non-governmental organizations and charities able to respond directly to local needs and provide support for the most disadvantaged. These debates, of course, have not just played out in academic and philosophical arenas, but have had a profound impact on the day-to-day lives of all people.

At present, a frenetic pace of change in countless spheres—from economics to climate, from technology to demographics—has fed a mounting sense of uncertainty. In every corner of the globe, growing masses live in precarious social conditions and governments find themselves paralyzed by disputes about their responsibility and capacity to respond. Despite the many achievements brought about by the prevailing sociopolitical order, its legitimacy is increasingly called into question. There is thus a crying need for a renewed vision of the place of public institutions in providing for social well-being.

As with many subjects involving extremes of perspective, instead of one side “winning” the ideological debate and attempting to impose itself, arriving at a lasting solution would seem to require a more moderate approach. The sustainability of any set of social arrangements depends on the degree to which genuine consensus is built. In this connection, the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, together with the Bahá'í community's emergent reconceptualization of the relationships between individuals, communities, and institutions, provide new vantage points from which to understand and begin to address current political impasses. Moreover, the writings and recorded utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá offer numerous insights on the subject of government's responsibilities and proper functioning. Disclosing glimpses of a world in which institutions and people work in concert for societal well-being, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words

illuminate a way forward characterized not by compromise between competing claims but by their reconciliation and harmonization.

The Emergence of the Modern Welfare State

In his seminal 1776 work *An Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith wrote that among a sovereign's central obligations was "the duty of erecting and maintaining certain public works and certain public institutions, which it can never be for the interest of any individual, or small number of individuals, to erect and maintain". These, he suggested, could not reasonably be established by a private interest because any profit they might generate could never repay the expense incurred, but they "may frequently do much more than repay it to a great society."¹

Smith, the so-called father of capitalism, was first and foremost a moral philosopher, and his concern was not only explaining the dynamics of the new political economy. He also pointed to the ethical implications of nascent capitalism—both in terms of the system's potential pitfalls and the social norms required for its proper functioning. As Smith saw markets as human constructions whose ultimate purpose was to serve the public good, in many of his writings, he designated a central role to government in safeguarding markets through considered regulation and in making provisions to ensure social well-being.²

In a sense, Smith's comments on the place of public institutions in society presaged a set of ideological contests that would shape the modern world. For thousands of years, human beings have debated the role of those in power to regulate individual action and provide for social needs. But these questions came into much sharper relief in the last two centuries as a result of the revolution of industrial capitalism in Europe and a variety of attendant developments. As a new age of material and technological abundance dawned, population levels grew and cities swelled with the rural peasantry entering the urban labor force. Millennia-old communal and familial arrangements for ensuring collective well-being were disrupted, and governments were increasingly expected to fill the gaps.

In the fertile soil of the political upheavals of the day and the mounting discontent with the new miseries produced by the industrial economic order, an array of European thinkers and activists developed the modern ideas of socialism and communism. While the specifics and ambition of their proposals varied greatly, they generally called for the collective ownership of the means of production as an antidote to what they saw as the exploitative capitalist system. In such schemas, the society as a whole would be the primary owner of the resources of economic life, and this ownership would be administered either by the state, by workers groups, or through some other collective framework. These ideas achieved their highest and most influential expression in the work of German philosopher Karl Marx, whose writings would provide the ideological and theoretical foundations for numerous movements and revolutions in the century to come. The most significant of these was undoubtedly the Russian Revolution of 1917 that led to the establishment of the Soviet Union—as this state would serve as the standard-bearer of international socialism and sociopolitical challenger to the Western capitalist order during most of the twentieth century.

But well before the rivalry between the capitalist and socialist camps erupted on the global stage, there were attempts to reconcile their respective aspirations and

appease differing factions through hybrid systems. Tracing its origins to late nineteenth century Germany, the modern welfare state emerged through this process. Under the leadership of Kaiser Wilhelm I and his “Iron Chancellor” Otto von Bismarck, the newly-united German nation implemented a series of policies designed to undermine the threat of socialism by meeting the social needs of the working class.³ The measures included health and accident insurance, an old-age pension program, and worker protection regulations.

Over the course of the early twentieth century, industrialized countries followed Germany’s lead and began expanding government’s involvement in social welfare. As with Bismarck’s government, many states faced the accusation that they were the defenders of a system that benefited the few at the expense of the suffering masses, and they therefore enacted measures to deliver essential services and curb the worst inequities. As humanity was rocked by world wars and the Great Depression, many wealthy nations established universal and targeted systems to provide healthcare, education, unemployment and disability benefits, pensions, childcare, and other public services. This was bolstered by the influential work of British economist John Maynard Keynes, who advocated increased public spending and government taking a more active role in the market and national employment levels.⁴ Moreover, following the conclusion of World War II and the emergence of the Cold War between the United States, the Soviet Union, and their respective allies, the capitalist West sought to demonstrate not only its military supremacy to the socialist East but also its superiority in delivering broad-based prosperity to its citizens. In this context, by the middle of the century, the welfare state—with varying degrees of comprehensiveness—had become the norm in high-income capitalist countries, and increasingly in poorer countries as well.

However, by the 1970s, the proposition that government ought to serve as the principal arbiter in ensuring social welfare, a proposition that seemed to have attained broad consensus, was eroding. The size and scope of most governments had expanded significantly in the decades prior, and a growing chorus of economists, led by Milton Friedman, argued that underwriting large, bureaucratic states was hamstringing private interests and impeding economic growth. Moreover, in the global ideological and geopolitical contest between capitalism and socialism, capitalism had gained the upper hand. As awareness grew about the atrocities occurring in the Soviet Union and cynicism rose about the failures of other revolutionary social movements to achieve their goals or even abide by their noble ideals, market economies were proving themselves more capable of delivering prosperity than planned economies. In this context, the capitalist governments of the world felt less and less pressure to prove their capacity to provide for social well-being.

The twilight of the Cold War witnessed the ascendance of so-called “neoliberalism”. Led by the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom, and prescribed to many developing economies, this economic vision entailed lowering taxes, privatizing state enterprises, deregulating markets, and promoting economic globalization through the reduction of national barriers to trade and investment. By the time the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, the implementation of such measures—combined with the forces of globalization—had succeeded in restructuring the relationship between many citizens and their national governments.⁵ In this context, one prominent thinker proclaimed the “end of history”, asserting that humanity had reached the end of its ideological evolution with Western-style liberal

democracy upholding a free-market economic system triumphing as “the final form of human government”.⁶

Contemporary challenges

Although the “end of history” claim was quickly met with skepticism and critique, in many ways the world has only moved closer to this vision in the years since. Countries in the “developed” world—supposedly representing the end goal that all “developing” nations should strive to attain—have continued to abide within this basic citizen-government compact, albeit with differing levels of government involvement in socioeconomic life. In Nordic countries, for instance, society operates based on a free market economy combined with a large public sector—funded by high levels of taxation relative to gross domestic product—that administers a comprehensive welfare state and actively engages in labor issues. But there are also countries where government plays a more modest role in promoting social welfare. The most prominent among these is the United States, with its restricted social safety net, relatively high levels of private provision of social services, and limited government involvement in labor issues.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, even as the liberal-democratic capitalist order remained ascendant on the global stage, there were increasing signs of an undercurrent of discontent. Resurgent and often deadly forces of religious fanaticism and ethno-nationalism, skyrocketing economic inequality, and the booms and busts inherent to the system dashed much of the optimism of the period immediately following the Cold War. Building on earlier traditions of distrust in government stewardship, this once-simmering dissatisfaction with political and economic elites began erupting to the surface.

As a result, humanity currently finds itself at a juncture of paradox and precarity. Despite objective gains in many metrics of human well-being in recent decades, large numbers of people perceive their lives and the world in general as becoming worse.⁷ Rich and poor countries alike are experiencing ever more uncertainty amidst unending transformations in the spheres of technology and employment, waves of internal and international migration, disasters precipitated by changes in the climate, and the havoc wreaked by global pandemics. In a world in which the notion of “disruption” itself is lauded as a social good, a growing number of citizens clamor for greater social stability.

However, there is a lack of clarity about from where this salve should come. Governments, the traditional purveyors of societal security, are externally looked upon with suspicion and are internally divided as to their responsibilities. Crises of faith in public institutions are everywhere apparent as society demonstrates itself bereft of a shared vision on this front.

The Bahá'í Perspective on Government Providing for Social Well-Being

In the nineteenth century, as the modern world was being forged by economic and political upheavals in Europe’s centers of power, another set of developments was agitating the status quo in sites across the Middle East. In 1863, one month before the

founding of the world's first socialist party,⁸ Bahá'u'lláh inaugurated a new chapter in a transformative movement that had been building for decades.

In the unassuming setting of a garden north of Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh declared that humanity was entering a new stage in its history and, over the course of the next several decades, gradually outlined a comprehensive assessment of the world's contemporary condition. He indicated that humankind stood at the cusp of its collective maturity and that the upheavals into which it had fallen were symptomatic of a turbulent adolescence. As such, the world was in need of new social tools and reinvigorated spiritual principles to give up outdated modes of social organization based on greed, conflict, and particularistic thinking and embrace a new ethic of reciprocity, collaboration, and universality. Bahá'u'lláh expressed that on the other side of this transitional period would be a peaceful and prosperous global civilization, but that it would be humanity's responsibility to construct this new world.

In this connection, the Bahá'í writings contain many insights for the restructuring of governance and social organization. Beginning in 1867, Bahá'u'lláh wrote to the kings and rulers of the world—including Emperor Napoleon III, Queen Victoria, Kaiser Wilhelm I, Tsar Alexander II, and Pope Pius IX—admonishing them to abandon wasteful and self-serving endeavors and dedicate their energies to the well-being of their citizens.⁹ And in 1875, 'Abdu'l-Bahá anonymously directed a treatise to the rulers and people of Persia, which laid out the practical and moral requirements for the nation to overcome its degraded condition and achieve prosperity.

Later published under the title *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, this unequalled work on the interplay of spiritual principle and political economy spoke to a nation struggling to enter the modern era. At a time when the Shah had publicly “resolved to bring about the advancement of the Persian people, their welfare and security and the prosperity of their country,”¹⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá advised the country's leaders to look to the rest of the world and learn from others' breakthroughs in science and public administration. By abandoning their cultural and religious biases, particularly concerning the West, and earnestly seeking knowledge and insight from whatever source it might come, they could overcome the country's stagnation. For 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a society characterized by the technological and institutional advancement of the West and the spiritual devotion of the East would be the envy of the world.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's call for national upliftment was directed at the entire society. Pointing to a reciprocal relationship between people and government, He indicated that the nation at every level was in need of education and a regeneration of moral principle grounded in spiritual conviction.¹¹ Moreover, provision had to be made for the well-being of all people, particularly the downtrodden, but *The Secret of Divine Civilization* does not stipulate categorically from where it should come. The source of public welfare is given less import than the assurance that the people's needs are met. For instance, with regard to the capacity of individual initiative to promote the common good, 'Abdu'l-Bahá discusses the prospect of a prosperous and enlightened person using his or her wealth to transform the fortunes of the generality of the people. He states:

Above all, if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this, and it would rank in the sight of God as the

supreme achievement, for such a benefactor would supply the needs and insure the comfort and well-being of a great multitude.¹²

But while ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes clear the duty of every individual to be “a source of social good”,¹³ He nevertheless places the ultimate responsibility for social well-being on government and leadership. It is the “monarch”, He says, “on whose high resolve the welfare of all his subjects depends.”¹⁴ At the core of *The Secret of Divine Civilization* is a call for authorities to abandon self-interest and act with moral rectitude. He writes that “any agency whatever, though it be the instrument of mankind’s greatest good, is capable of misuse. Its proper use or abuse depends on the varying degrees of enlightenment, capacity, faith, honesty, devotion, and high-mindedness of the leaders of public opinion.”¹⁵

On this note, while *The Secret of Divine Civilization* highlights a number of practical considerations for the building of a materially and spiritually prosperous society, it is primarily concerned with establishing the social norms on which the project can be sustainably undertaken. The same can be said of the Bahá’í teachings more generally. The Bahá’í Faith does not put forward a blueprint for a new sociopolitical system, but rather calls for the development of new modes of social engagement and collective decision-making capable of giving rise to such a system. In the Bahá’í view, without a renewal of attitudes and qualities such as compassion, selflessness, and fairmindedness at the individual and collective levels, the idea of erecting just social structures is a chimera.

Although the Bahá’í writings do not advance technical policy prescriptions, they nevertheless offer glimpses of some practical arrangements of a society befitting a humanity that has come of age. What follows are a number of these interconnecting guiding lines. At the outset, it should be noted that the implication here is not that there is a particular model to be realized but rather that there are multiple ways to arrive at the same social outcome. Different governments may adopt different approaches to respond to the unique realities and social needs of their people—though by embracing a posture of learning, they can continually gain insight from one another’s advances and adjust their approaches accordingly. Nevertheless, the Faith does make clear that there are certain social thresholds below which it is immoral to let any member of the human family fall—and others which it is likewise immoral to surpass. As such, certain principles on governance and social welfare might well be regarded as universal. On this note, it should also be stressed that the topics addressed below do not represent a comprehensive treatment of the Bahá’í perspective on the subject. While the Bahá’í teachings emphasize an integrated vision of human well-being and contain countless insights on questions ranging from education to health to societal cohesion, the guiding lines that follow focus on issues related to economic conditions.

Elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty

One of the most widely discussed subjects in the world today is income inequality. For this reason, few of the social teachings of the Bahá’í Faith seem as relevant now as the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty. This cardinal Bahá’í principle recurs, in particular, throughout the writings and recorded utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who was emphatic as to the grave injustice of extreme inequality and

its destabilizing effect on society. Not to be confused with complete equalization, which for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would go against nature and result in “chaos” and “universal disappointment”,¹⁶ He describes the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty in this way:

Certainly, some being enormously rich and others lamentably poor, an organization is necessary to control and improve this state of affairs. It is important to limit riches, as it is also of importance to limit poverty. Either extreme is not good. To be seated in the mean is most desirable. If it be right for a capitalist to possess a large fortune, it is equally just that his workman should have a sufficient means of existence.¹⁷

It bears noting that at the time ‘Abdu’l-Bahá made this statement in Paris in 1911, the Western world was experiencing a period of heightened inequality.¹⁸ In many ways, present-day economic conditions are the same as those to which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke, with extremes of wealth and poverty that are difficult to fathom.¹⁹ Such a skewed distribution of resources not only has countless deleterious effects on the ability of those living in poverty to lead happy, healthy, fulfilling lives, but has been shown to be detrimental to the entirety of society—including to the wealthy.²⁰ Addressing this imbalance thus represents one of the most pressing issues facing humanity. The question, of course, is how. And on this front, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points to regulatory and legislative means:

There must be special laws made, dealing with these extremes of riches and of want. The members of the Government should consider the laws of God when they are framing plans for the ruling of the people. The general rights of mankind must be guarded and preserved.... The government of the countries should conform to the Divine Law which gives equal justice to all. This is the only way in which the deplorable superfluity of great wealth and miserable, demoralizing, degrading poverty can be abolished.²¹

In utterances like this and many others, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá lays the responsibility of correcting the imbalance of extreme inequality on government. He repeatedly states that the “remedy must be legislative readjustment of conditions”,²² as such laws represent the “greatest means” for promoting social equity.²³

Taxation and voluntary giving

When speaking of legislative action to foster social equity, the most often cited means is progressive taxation. Since the first modern income taxes were levied in Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century,²⁴ the notion that taxpayers ought to pay incrementally greater percentages of their income or wealth based on what they have and what they earn has become commonplace. In recent years, in the context of growing levels of inequality, leading economists have proposed aggressively redistributive tax rates to try to limit the concentration of wealth among a small few. This, they contend, would lead to a more equitable circulation of resources and curb the social and economic instability caused by extreme inequality.²⁵

A century ago, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also laid out a schema for progressive taxation. Writing that the “question of economics must commence with the farmer and then be extended to the other classes” as “the farmer is the first active agent in human society”, He describes a system for the collection of taxes in a village and their payment to a community “storehouse”.²⁶ Administered by an elected local board composed of trustworthy individuals, the storehouse would have multiple sources of revenue. The first source would be a “tithe” owed by farmers, which would be calculated in consideration of their revenue and needful expenditures. By way of example, He defines a five-tiered taxation scale in which farmers whose annual income is equal to their expenses—that is, with no surplus—would pay nothing to the storehouse, while those with the greatest surpluses would pay half of their income to it. In between, He gives scenarios of farmers owing, respectively, one-tenth, one-fourth, and one-third of their net earnings.²⁷

The reason for these progressive taxation rates is to address disparities in people’s means and needs. In the context of all people contributing to the community’s output, such a measure promotes social equity and ensures the elimination of poverty. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains:

All must be producers. Each person in the community whose income is equal to his individual producing capacity shall be exempt from taxation. But if his income is greater than his needs he must pay a tax until an adjustment is effected. That is to say, a man’s capacity for production and his needs will be equalized and reconciled through taxation. If his production exceeds, he will pay a tax; if his necessities exceed his production he shall receive an amount sufficient to equalize or adjust. Therefore taxation will be proportionate to capacity and production and there will be no poor in the community.²⁸

It is important to note that, for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, such a measure would be founded on an ethic of reciprocity and social trust. Those contributing to the village storehouse would do so knowing that their contributions would help ensure the well-being of their neighbors, particularly those who may be unable to provide for themselves—such as orphans, the elderly, and those with disabilities. In addition, any member of the community that confronted a set of emergency expenses would be able to draw from the storehouse. Thus, all contributors would simultaneously be beneficiaries. The same principles would hold true in large urban settings, though on a larger and more complex scale.²⁹

The sense of social trust and reciprocity underpinning the storehouse would be bolstered by local control of its finances. It is only after all local needs are covered, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, that any surplus found in the storehouse would “be transferred to the national treasury.”³⁰ But on a more profound level, its proper functioning would depend on a particular worldview and moral orientation at the communal level. Specifically, it would require a conception of individual well-being as inextricably tied to collective well-being—that is, of individuals constituting component parts of an organic social body. Notions of individual accumulation and the primacy of individual ownership would need to be subordinated to a vision of private property as simply a means to the end of collective prosperity.

In this connection, in the Bahá’í view, the giving of one’s property for the collective good should be an act performed willingly, and not one based on coercion.

On this note, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserts:

To state the matter briefly, the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh advocate voluntary sharing, and this is a greater thing than the equalization of wealth. For equalization must be imposed from without, while sharing is a matter of free choice... Man reacheth perfection through good deeds, voluntarily performed, not through good deeds the doing of which was forced upon him. And sharing is a personally chosen righteous act: that is, the rich should extend assistance to the poor, they should expend their substance for the poor, but of their own free will, and not because the poor have gained this end by force. For the harvest of force is turmoil and the ruin of the social order. On the other hand voluntary sharing, the freely-chosen expending of one's substance, leadeth to society's comfort and peace. It lighteth up the world; it bestoweth honour upon humankind.³¹

This principle of voluntary sharing applies not only to charity, but also holds true in relation to the Bahá'í conception of taxation.³² As seen in the description of the community storehouse and the moral framework that undergirds it, taxation in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's view represents a “duty” in the true sense of the word—that is, an obligation enthusiastically fulfilled. On this note, while it is possible to approach the above passages from an individualistic perspective, such a reading gives rise to an apparent incongruence between the dual counsels on externally-imposed taxation and freely-performed giving. However, this seeming discrepancy may be reconciled by looking at the issue through a collective lens. That is to say, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá may be indicating that the wealthy segments of society, as a whole, need to voluntarily support and submit to progressive taxation policies. From this perspective, rather than such measures arising from, say, a coercive revolution of the working classes, they would be the result of an act of collective will across society. Discretionary charitable giving, then, would be in addition to these agreed-upon contributions.

In this connection, the Bahá'í vision of taxation finds its most complete expression in the law of Huqúqu'lláh. The “Right of God”, Huqúqu'lláh was set forth by Bahá'u'lláh and stipulates the payment of 19% of any wealth in excess of one's needful expenses to the center of the Faith—currently the Universal House of Justice. These monies are to be expended for humanitarian purposes and are intended to help equalize levels of wealth across different parts of the world. The calculation and payment of Huqúqu'lláh are left to the discretion of the individual; it is not solicited nor is its amount determined by any authority. It thus depends entirely on an individual's conscience and must be paid with sincere joy in order to be acceptable.

Decent work

In addition to income inequality and taxation, one of the most daunting challenges facing policymakers today is expanding opportunities for meaningful, secure, and fairly-remunerated employment. In many places, where stable work in manufacturing, agriculture, and professional services was previously the norm, a restructuring of the labor force is taking place—with short-term, contract, and informal jobs becoming more and more common. Among other factors, the rise of the “gig economy” is being driven by increasing levels of automation, in which machines carry out tasks formerly done by humans. While the earliest advances in automation date back to at least the industrial revolution, leading voices have signaled that the world is

now in the first stages of a new revolution in automation with the potential for even more disruptive results. Breakthroughs in artificial intelligence and related spheres are making machines capable of performing highly-sophisticated functions that match or exceed the capabilities of the human brain.³³

While such labor-saving innovations hold great promise for humanity, their rewards have thus far not been equally enjoyed by all. On the contrary, in the twenty-first century they have begun to leave growing legions of workers scrambling to piece together livelihoods as their work becomes obsolete. On this front, the forecasts of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offer a vision for how humanity can not only cope but thrive in the midst of such changes. Speaking at a time of comparable economic transformation,³⁴ when the fight for labor rights was picking up momentum in the Western world, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá illustrated a vision of fair remuneration of workers and the liberation of humanity from long hours occupied with mundane, back-breaking tasks:

The civilizations of the past have all been founded upon the enslavement of mankind and the poor working class has suffered every oppression for the sake of the enrichment of the few. This limited wealthy class has alone had the privilege of developing individuality. The down trodden worker after labouring long hours each day, has not had sufficient mental capacity at the conclusion of his task to do anything but eat and sleep.

That all mankind might have opportunity, it was necessary to shorten the hours of labour so that the work of the world could be completed without such demand of strain and effort, and all human beings would have leisure to think and develop individual capacity....

The first decided shortening of the hours will appear.. when a legal working day of eight hours is established.... But this working day of eight hours is only the beginning.... Soon there will be a six hour day, a five hour, a three hour day, even less than that, and the worker must be paid more for this management of machines, than he ever received for the exercise of his two hands alone....

You cannot understand now, how the labour saving machines can produce leisure for mankind because at present they are all in the hands of the financiers and are used only to increase profits, but that will not continue. The workers will come into their due benefit from the machine that is the divine intention, and one cannot continue to violate the law of God. So with the assurance of a comfortable income from his work, and ample leisure for each one, poverty will be banished and each community will create comfort and opportunity for its citizens. Education will then be universal at the cost of the state, and no person will be deprived of its opportunity.³⁵

In other recorded utterances, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points to the role that government ought to play in managing changes in labor relations. Through the development of sound policy, public institutions have the capacity to help ensure that all people can truly benefit from advances in technology, so that all are able to earn a living and contribute to society through a trade or profession. Specifically, He indicates that elected leaders bear the responsibility for resolving the issue of wages. Wage agreements should be developed, He says, with wisdom and moderation, “so neither

the capitalist suffer from enormous losses nor the laborers become needy.”³⁶ On this note, He encourages the adoption of systems of employee share ownership—a scheme that has gained increased acceptance in recent years—as a way to foster both equitable compensation and workers’ sense of identification with their labor:

For instance, the owners of properties, mines and factories should share their incomes with their employees and give a fairly certain percentage of their products to their workmen in order that the employees may receive, beside their wages, some of the general income of the factory so that the employee may strive with his soul in the work.³⁷

Rethinking Prevailing Modes of Collective Decision Making

The foregoing pages offer glimpses of a new set of social arrangements characterized by justice and concern for all people’s welfare. However, it should be emphasized that many of the practical proposals outlined above are not unique to the Bahá’í writings. Many have been discussed in policy circles for decades, if not centuries. While the Bahá’í Faith envisions a transformation in the social life of humanity far more rich and profound than, say, an idealized balance between capitalism and socialism, it may well be that current sociopolitical systems possess many of the substantive elements of such a future civilization.³⁸

To be sure, in many instances it is not that the solutions to contemporary social challenges have not yet been imagined, but rather that humanity lacks the means and collective will to reach agreement on and move toward them. To achieve progress, seeing what is on the horizon is not enough; what is needed are new patterns for making and implementing collective decisions. This issue lies at the heart of the idea of governance itself, and it is on this front that the insights of the Bahá’í teachings are perhaps most significant.

At present, the central obstacle to moving toward a shared vision of government’s role in promoting social well-being is the way the issue tends to be framed—that is, as a debate. In many countries, political discourse has become so clouded by ideology that it has become divorced from the potential merits and shortcomings of the policy proposals themselves. Driving this apparent irreconcilability of perspectives are divergent conceptions of the rights and responsibilities of individuals, communities, and institutions, as well as associated concepts related to autonomy, choice, authority, and prosperity. On this subject, the Universal House of Justice has written:

Throughout human history, interactions among [the individual, the institutions, and the community] have been fraught with difficulties at every turn, with the individual clamouring for freedom, the institution demanding submission, and the community claiming precedence. Every society has defined, in one way or another, the relationships that bind the three, giving rise to periods of stability, interwoven with turmoil. Today, in this age of transition, as humanity struggles to attain its collective maturity, such relationships—nay, the very conception of the individual, of social institutions, and of the community—continue to be assailed by crises too numerous to count.³⁹

In the context of the current culture, social policy typically involves imposing the vision of political “winners” on political “losers”, along with the diluting of social programs in the common interest to appease special interests. As such, even if a veritably flawless social, economic, and political system were somehow developed, it would be impossible to know because, if implemented, it would immediately be resisted and undermined by dissenting factions clinging to their own perspectives and not allowing the system to ever achieve its potential.

On this note, the Bahá’í writings suggest that no social reform—no matter how well-designed or sophisticated—can lead to the desired outcome if it is not precipitated and accompanied by a particular set of values and attitudes. But such qualities are not static, nor do they emerge spontaneously. In the Bahá’í view, humanity therefore needs to engage in an intentional, iterative process of learning about the principles that make for a just, prosperous, and unified society and how these can be systematically cultivated at the individual and collective levels.

From this perspective, it is not only about what policy decisions are made but about how they are made. And here, the Bahá’í principle of consultation sheds light on a new way of arriving at decisions of shared import. In consultation, individuals come together in an earnest attempt to discover the truth and make decisions, not through begrudging negotiation or even amicable compromise, but through a sincere setting aside of self-interest and personal preference. “No welfare and no well-being”, affirms Bahá’u’lláh, “can be attained except through consultation.”⁴⁰ On the use of consultation within the elected bodies of the Bahá’í community, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one’s views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden.⁴¹

By prizing humility over forcefulness, dialogue over debate, and truth over victory, consultation opens the way to a mode of making decisions in which options are dispassionately assessed and a variety of perspectives serve to build a more complete vision of social reality. By championing true consensus-building and a universal sense of ownership of the arrived-at decisions, it allows individuals, communities, and institutions to engage in a process of shared learning. In this way, plans and systems can be objectively evaluated, and those that work can be sustained while those that do not can be discarded or reformed.

Such a model of genuine deliberation is clearly a departure from those dominant in the political systems in the world today. Nevertheless, signs abound that humanity is tiring of growing levels of partisan gridlock and rancor preventing government from living up to its potential. It is clear in the writings of the Bahá’í Faith that public institutions have an indispensable role in ensuring humanity’s social well-being, but central to the challenge of fulfilling this duty will be fostering a new ethic of leadership and alternative patterns of governance. Bringing about this change will no doubt require continual proactive effort,⁴² as well as much trial and error. Still, there is every reason to be optimistic that this long-term process of institutional maturation is already in course. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

The world of politics is like the world of man; he is seed at first, and then passes by degrees to the condition of embryo and foetus, acquiring a bone structure, being clothed with flesh, taking on his own special form, until at last he reaches the plane where he can befittingly fulfill the words: “the most excellent of Makers.” Just as this is a requirement of creation and is based on the universal Wisdom, the political world in the same way cannot instantaneously evolve from the nadir of defectiveness to the zenith of rightness and perfection. Rather, qualified individuals must strive by day and by night, using all those means which will conduce to progress, until the government and the people develop along every line from day to day and even from moment to moment.⁴³

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Notes

1. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations: Books IV-V* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 310.
2. Smith leveled harsh criticisms against the actions and motivations of the employer “order”, saying that its interests were “never exactly the same with that of the public” and it generally had “an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public” (Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations: Books I-III*, London: Penguin, 1999, p. 359). He also advocated higher taxation on the rich, especially on those deriving and maintaining their wealth from rents, and displayed a deep concern for the soul-crushing effects of laborers having to engage in mindless, repetitive work (Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations: Books IV-V*, London: Penguin, 1999, pp. 368-434).
3. It is worth mentioning that some historians have questioned the notion that Bismarck’s social welfare policies were simply a ploy to stave off socialism. They argue that his anti-socialism was rather a strategic device employed to push through a controversial set of reforms designed to mitigate the human strains of industrialization, bolster worker loyalty to the state, and thereby allow growth to continue uninterrupted and traditional power inequalities to be maintained (Adam Gaffney, *To Heal Humankind: The Right to Health in History*, New York: Routledge, 2017, p. 76).
4. In view of this discussion, it is interesting to note that John Maynard Keynes once famously commented: “The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else” (John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, London: Macmillan, 1936, p. 383).
5. Even China, the last major flag-bearer of international socialism, had introduced in the preceding years a series of transformative economic reforms, leading to its signature “socialist market economy” and the eventual lifting of 850 million citizens out of poverty (World Bank website, “The World Bank in China”: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>, accessed 25 January 2020).
6. Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?”, *The National Interest*, no. 16, 1989. Fukuyama later expanded this article into the 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*.
7. Max Roser, “Most of us are wrong about how the world has changed (especially those who are pessimistic about the future)”, *Our World in Data*, 27 July 2018: <https://ourworldindata.org/wrong-about-the-world>, accessed 25 January 2020.
8. Ferdinand Lassalle, the originator of the idea of “state socialism,” founded the General German Workers’ Association on 23 May 1863. In contrast to Marx, who saw the state as an apparatus for maintaining existing class structures, Lassalle considered the state to be independent of class allegiances, a potential instrument of justice, and therefore essential to establishing socialism (Gary Dorrien, *Social Democracy in the Making: Political and Religious Roots of European Socialism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019, p. 59).
9. These messages are compiled in the book *Summons of the Lord of Hosts*.
10. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 5.
11. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that Persia’s “people must make a massive effort” and that “[c]lose investigation will show that the primary cause of oppression and injustice, of unrighteousness,

irregularity and disorder, is the people's lack of religious faith and the fact that they are uneducated. When, for example, the people are genuinely religious and are literate and well-schooled, and a difficulty presents itself, they can apply to the local authorities; if they do not meet with justice and secure their rights and if they see that the conduct of the local government is incompatible with the divine good pleasure and the king's justice, they can then take their case to higher courts and describe the deviation of the local administration from the spiritual law. Those courts can then send for the local records of the case and in this way justice will be done. At present, however, because of their inadequate schooling, most of the population lack even the vocabulary to explain what they want" (Ibid., pp. 10-18).

12. Ibid., p. 24.
13. Ibid., p. 2.
14. Ibid., p. 11. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the obligation of a leader to view his or her work as an act of service and to "consider the welfare of the community as one's own" (Ibid., p. 39).
15. Ibid., p. 23. On a policy level, 'Abdu'l-Bahá identified the widespread practice of bribery among Persian government officials, known "by the pleasant names of gifts and favors," and asserted that such behavior could in part be curbed by relieving provincial authorities of the corrupting influence of "absolute authority" (Ibid., p. 15).
16. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 273-274.
17. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 152. In another instance, He affirms: "Consider an individual who has amassed treasures by colonizing a country for his profit: he has obtained an incomparable fortune and has secured profits and incomes which flow like a river, while a hundred thousand unfortunate people, weak and powerless, are in need of a mouthful of bread. There is neither equality nor benevolence. So you see that general peace and joy are destroyed, and the welfare of humanity is negated to such an extent as to make fruitless the lives of many. For fortune, honors, commerce, industry are in the hands of some industrialists, while other people are submitted to quite a series of difficulties and to limitless troubles: they have neither advantages, nor profits, nor comforts, nor peace" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 273-274).
18. For example, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed the subject again in New York City in 1912, it is estimated that the top 1% of earners in the United States were taking in nearly a fifth of the nation's income. This figure fell substantially in subsequent decades but has rebounded and been surpassed in recent years (Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman, "Distributional National Accounts: Methods and Estimates for the United States", *NBER Working Paper Series*, National Bureau of Economic Research, December 2016: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w22945.pdf>, accessed 25 January 2020).
19. It has been reported that in 2009 the combined wealth of the world's 380 richest people equaled that of the poorest 50% of the planet's population—that is, more than three and a half billion people—but by 2019 the disparity had grown significantly, with just 26 individuals having as much as the poorest half of the world (Larry Elliott, "World's 26 richest people own as much as poorest 50%, says Oxfam", *The Guardian*, 21 January 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/jan/21/world-26-richest-people-own-as-much-as-poorest-50-per-cent-oxfam-report>, accessed 25 January 2020).
20. See, for example, Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (London: Penguin, 2010).
21. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 152.
22. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 107.
23. Ibid., p. 216.
24. The tax was introduced in 1799 to fund the growing war against Napoleon. It required all annual incomes over £200 to be taxed at a rate of 10% and incomes between £60 and £200 to be taxed at a graduated rate from less than 1% to 10%; incomes below £60 were not taxed (Parliament of the United Kingdom website, "War and the coming of income tax": <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/taxation/overview/incometax/>, accessed 25 January 2020).
25. In the landmark 2013 book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, for example, Thomas Piketty proposes an annual global wealth tax of up to 2% and a progressive income tax up to 80% for the very highest earners.
26. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Additional Tablets, Extracts and Talks", Bahá'í Reference Library website: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/additional-tablets-extracts-talks/>, accessed 25 January 2020.

27. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "As to the first, the tenths or tithes: we will consider a farmer, one of the peasants. We will look into his income. We will find out, for instance, what is his annual revenue and also what are his expenditures. Now, if his income be equal to his expenditures, from such a farmer nothing whatever will be taken. That is, he will not be subjected to taxation of any sort, needing as he does all his income. Another farmer may have expenses running up to one thousand dollars we will say, and his income is two thousand dollars. From such [a farmer] a tenth will be required, because he has a surplus. But if his income be ten thousand dollars and his expenses one thousand dollars... he will have to pay as taxes, one-fourth. If his income be one hundred thousand dollars and his expenses five thousand, one-third will he have to pay.... But if his expenses be ten thousand and his income two hundred thousand then he must give an even half because ninety thousand will be in that case the sum remaining. Such a scale as this will determine allotment of taxes. All the income from such revenues will go to this general storehouse" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 40).
28. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 217.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 40. It is interesting to note that the high-tax Nordic countries mentioned above maintain a similar type of local control of tax revenue, with municipal income tax rates often higher than national rates and decisions about how to use these funds made close to the tax base.
31. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 115.
32. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 107.
33. Klaus Schwab, "The Fourth Industrial Revolution: What It Means and How to Respond", *Foreign Affairs*, 12 December 2015: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-12-12/fourth-industrial-revolution>, accessed 25 January 2020.
34. The so-called "Second Industrial Revolution" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
35. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as reported by Mary Hanford Ford in *Star of the West*, Volume 10, pp. 106-107. It is worth noting that a few years after 'Abdu'l-Bahá made this prediction about the shortening of the working day to eight hours, US President Woodrow Wilson enacted the legal day of eight hours for all federal workers, which subsequently became the norm for all US workers.
36. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 43.
37. *Ibid.*
38. In this connection, Shoghi Effendi asserts the following: "In the Bahá'í economic system of the future, private ownership will be retained, but will be controlled, regulated, and even restricted. Complete socialization is not only impossible but most unjust, and in this the Cause is in fundamental disagreement with the extreme socialists or communists. It cannot also agree with the other extreme tendency represented by the 'Laissez-faire' or individualistic school of economics which became very popular in the late eighteenth century, by the so-called democratic countries. For absolute freedom, even in the economic sphere, leads to confusion and corruption, and acts not only to the detriment of the state, or the collectivity, but inevitably results in the end in jeopardizing the very interests of the individual himself.... The Cause can and indeed will in the future maintain the right balance between the two tendencies of individualism and collectivism, not only in the field of economics, but in all other social domains" (cited in Hooshmand Badee, ed., *The True Foundation of All Economics*: https://bahai-library.com/pdf/b/badee_compilation_foundation_economics.pdf, accessed 25 January 2020).
39. Universal House of Justice, Letter to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors dated 28 December 2010, "Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice", Bahá'í Reference Library website: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/>, accessed 25 January 2020.
40. Bahá'u'lláh, as quoted in *The Prosperity of Humankind*, a statement by the Bahá'í International Community, 1995.
41. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 88.
42. In *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "If haste is harmful, inertness and indolence are a thousand times worse" (p. 108).
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.