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The Full Context: Imposing Obligations on Future Generations

In most political debates, we hear lots of claims about the alleged benefits of a particular program or policy. Those benefits invariably address some current problem (whether real or imagined) with little consideration of the long-term consequences. However, today's policy decisions have implications and applications that extend far beyond the short-term. The decisions that we make today can make impositions on future generations—our children, grandchildren, and beyond. If we want to make wise decisions, then we must consider the full context. And that means understanding the implications for future generations.

As an example, consider a proposal to sell bonds for some government project. The bonds will be repaid out of future taxes. And the taxes will be paid, at least in part, by individuals who had no voice in the proposal. This is true no matter what the bond money will be used for. Obligations are imposed on future generations. Future taxpayers—new residents, today's children, and even unborn generations—will be responsible for paying the debts authorized by today's voters.

Certainly, we have inherited the policies and institutions of previous generations. But why should we inherit obligations that they have imposed on us? Is that justice? Why should we be obligated to pay for the debts incurred by our parents, grandparents, or anyone else? And why should we impose obligations on our children, our grandchildren, or anyone else? When we support government expenditures today that will be repaid tomorrow, that is precisely what we do. Is that justice? Would you max out your credit cards and expect your children, grandchildren, or anyone else to pay them off?

But this issue goes beyond government expenditures. All government policies and programs impose obligations, and more frequently, restrictions, on future generations. Consider zoning as an example.

When zoning first came into vogue in the early 20th century, one of its stated purposes was to segregate land uses—industrial, commercial, and residential land uses were deemed “incompatible” and thus relegated to different zones of a city.

But today, mixed-use developments are all the rage. People want to be within walking distance of restaurants, shops, and even work. They want a different kind of community than previous generations wanted. However, the policies and decisions from those previous generations have made it more difficult to meet the needs and desires of today's Americans. Rather than quickly redevelop an area to meet market demands, builders and developers must spend time, energy, and money groveling at the feet of zoning officials begging for permission to provide what consumers want. The costs of those past policy decisions are borne by today's consumers through higher prices and fewer choices.

Rational parents tell their children that they can achieve anything that they are willing to work hard for. The sky is the limit, they say. Yet, those same parents will eagerly embrace policies that impose future obligations and restrictions on their children. They do so because they aren't

considering the full context. They aren't thinking about all of the long-term implications of today's policy decisions. They aren't considering the obligations and restrictions that today's bond vote or land-use regulation will impose on their children and grandchildren.

So, what is the full context? How do we address issues today without imposing obligations and restrictions on future generations?

The simple answer is: respect and protect individual rights, including property rights.

Rights protect our freedom to act as we judge best, so long as we respect the freedom of others to do the same. And the only way that we can be prevented from acting as we choose is through physical force. If someone ties us up, threatens us with a gun, or breaks into our house, we can't act as we deem best.

Property is the means by which we sustain and enhance our lives. We acquire property—a home, a car, clothing, gadgets, and more—because we think that they will make our lives better. If we are prevented from acquiring and using property as we choose, then our own judgment is irrelevant. Our own dreams are squashed. Our ability to flourish is reduced.

When we impose obligations or restrictions on future generations, we prevent them from acting on their own judgment. They must act, not as they choose, but as we have chosen for them. We stifle their dreams, no matter what we tell them. If we authorize bonds today, our children and grandchildren must repay them tomorrow. That is money that they did not choose to spend—we made that choice for them. Their own choices are irrelevant—they are saddled with the choices made by previous generations. If we enact land-use regulations today, our children and grandchildren must abide by them tomorrow. Their own choices will be irrelevant; the policies that we enact today will violate their rights tomorrow. That is the full context.

But if we respect and protect individual rights today, then we respect and protect the freedom of future generations to act on their own judgment in the pursuit of their own happiness. We impose no restrictions or obligations on them. We give them a free and clear road to pursue their dreams and to flourish.



The Texas Institute for Property Rights provides analysis, training, and resources for legislators, businesses, organizations, and property owners.

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