

1) In Brunner’s opinion what is or are the problems(s) with governance?

He described the larger problems of governance in the United States as “the failure to clarify and secure the common interest through specific policies in natural resources as well as in other policy areas”. He went on to explain that the common interest is hard to find “within the complex division of authority and control among numerous parts of the federal government with distinctive mandates and jurisdictions, their counterparts in state and local governments, and the nongovernmental groups that lobby and litigate for particular economic, environmental, and other interests.”

The specific problems mentioned were gridlock, demoscclerosis, single-issue politics, and disconnect.

2) What in Brunner’s opinion are the current trends with respect to governance?

Currently the proliferation of national associations makes it difficult for governmental officials to “meet public expectations as more agencies and interest groups are organized and able to block each other more often.” Government structure becomes complicated and reactionary as it institutionalizes conflict and instead of trying to find consensus. Conflicting laws, mandates, and pressure groups make any choice untenable and likely to bring litigation. Brunner has identified community-based initiatives as a current trend that can undermine the current knotted structures of government. He also points to proposals such as tightening disclosure rules, closing campaign-finance law loopholes, making federal officials and agencies more accountable to the Congress and the President, and term limits that address symptoms, but not the root cause.

3) What in Brunner’s opinion should our goal be with respect to governance?

I think Brunner had two goals in mind. The first should be to clarify and secure the common interest through specific policies in natural resources as well as in other policy areas. The second should be constitutive reform. He suggests that community-based initiatives have the potential to do just that.

4) Do these themes resonate with you? If so, how? If not, why?

I’ve been frustrated with governance in several countries. As a Peace Corps Volunteer (and an American) my first instinct has always been to develop some form of community-based initiative. Be it an ethnically mixed local Model UN team, a city based NGO working on inter-ethnic relations, an island based reading council to address illiteracy these approaches accomplished something without having to take on the whole system. Successful initiatives were picked up by other volunteers and used in many communities.

Sometimes, I met resistance. I would hear things like, “if we do the government’s job, then the government will never do it.” I never had a good response to that. After reading this article, I think I would suggest that these initiatives are just the ticket to undermine current governmental structures and convince the government to do this work.