

*More on "the Common Sense of the Subject"*

Because all men are created equal, no man is by nature the ruler of another—as any man can be said to be by nature the ruler of any dog—so that legitimate political authority can be said to be grounded in consent. What this means is made more explicit in the Massachusetts Bill of Rights:

The body politic is formed by a voluntary association of individuals; it is a social compact by which the whole people covenants with each citizen and each citizen with the whole people that all shall be governed by certain laws for the common good.

The people thus “covenant” with each other to form a people before they have the authority either to establish, to dissolve, or to reestablish political authority. The source of the authority of the people, taken as a whole, lies in the rights with which each individual has been “endowed by [her or his] Creator,” which rights can be better secured by governments than they could ever be by individuals acting alone. “The people” consists of human individuals who have covenanted together to be a people in order to have the protection that government can provide. From the people, then, are derived “the just powers” of government. Not *any* powers, only *just* powers. The government cannot derive from the people powers that individuals did not consent should be exercised on their behalf. Limited government in general, and the freedoms of the First Amendment—but not only the First Amendment—in particular are grounded in and derived from the natural rights of individuals.

Governments—which is to say, legitimate governments, not governments based upon force or fraud—are instituted “to secure these rights.” Whenever any form of government “becomes destructive of *these ends*, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it.” But their right to alter or abolish governments is not unqualified—not a right *ad libitum* to be exercised for any purpose whatever. The people have a right to overthrow only governments destructive of certain ends, and to institute new governments only as they are conducive to the same ends—ends fixed by the nature of man. The people are at full liberty to deliberate as to what means conduce to these ends, but they do not deliberate as to the ends

themselves. The people are subject to the moral law. They are not a gang of robbers. Because—but only because—they are a “good people” they may confidently appeal “to the Supreme Judge of the world, for the rectitude of [their] intentions.”

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