

Somebody, Please Stop Us

Issue #2



Somebody, Please Stop Us is a zine where we choose the topics, not the American media. A zine focused on pro-social politics, not Democrat or Republican. A zine that takes on corporate domination of our government; reimagines animals as equals; supports policies that reduce desperation; recognizes the sovereignty of other countries and indigenous rights.

Right now, in the media, we either get long drawn-out chatter or soundbite news... it's a real problem. People are busy scrambling to work, trying to pay the bills and take care of their family. Where is the time to engage with politics?

And yet, the political situation has become untenable and requires our attention. We get short burst of information out of context. The stories we hear may be mildly interesting, but we flit from topic to topic with each news cycle, unable to grasp the import or significance, and certainly unable to respond.

Our society has devolved into shouting matches filled with negativity. The super-wealthy make decisions for us. Whatever they decide is best. The politicians are more than willing to listen as long as campaign money is on the table. The lobbying industry has exploded under Trump as policy decisions go up for sale.

But we can't let ourselves fall into cynicism and negativity. We can't allow them to keep separating us into groups, pitting one against the other while they make away with the bank. We have some real treasures here in America that are worth defending. We have to clear the dust and rubble and trash. We must unearth our values.

The format of *Somebody, Please Stop Us* is to take one or two core societal issues and really explore them in each publication. No more soundbites or blather. We will take a deep dive and offer novel solutions. We will consider the public good and all beings on Earth.

The cover art is a picture I took recently in NYC: A mailbox once used for letters, now a dump for consumers. It felt symbolic. I don't mean to be overly nostalgic, but has letter writing become a lost art? The epistolary novel—a relic? When AI just gives us the answer, what happens to our research skills? Where is the adventure? The process of inquiry? How many inventions and breakthroughs and revelations were stumbled upon because we Didn't know the answer? (It reminds me of how GPS has erased the fun of getting lost). Walking the stacks of the library -- for me -- often led to a kind of serendipity. I found answers to questions that I didn't even know I had.

This raises the broader question of how technology is impacting us. Our eyes strained from screens; our bodies withering in cubicles and cars. Our emotions becoming nullified as we overdose on millions of tragedies. Empathy reduced. Desensitization. We are told to accept these things as trade-offs for a better life. We are told that AI will not become yet another tool of the rich, that the benefits will reach us. But in what form? Do we really want a personal AI-bot armed with our credit card buying products on our behalf? Do we want marketers writing programs to then influence our AI-bot's buying habits?

This manner of development will only exacerbate existing problems. The developing world is being pillaged and polluted so that we can have even more technology. It's not enough that mechanized-chemical-GMO farming has separated us from the land or that we have five screens in every house. We need more. The chemical and industrial revolutions have delivered cancer along with convenience. They've given us mass obesity and diabetes, but don't worry, these revolutions also provide the drugs to cure you! It's all good for the economy so enjoy the ride!

We can steer a different path. We can create a blue national park system in the oceans. We can take a page from Costa Rica's book and protect our environment; they live in a clean protected environment with an economy driven by farming and eco-tourism. If you are a peasant, but own a small piece of land in Costa Rica, and you meet income guidelines, the government will build you a basic house. That's how much wealth protecting the environment can create! We can move away from petroleum-based plastics and use renewable and reusable alternatives. We can mandate that companies must have a plan for recycling and fixing their products before they go to market; that tech companies must stop using adhesives that hinder repairs.

There's still time to choose a world where children sink their hands in the earth; make discoveries through experience, trial and error; feel compassion for a full spectrum of life forms, no matter how different from ourselves... some of these species have been here for millions of years. In comparison, humans seem like a blip in evolutionary time, but we're having a vast impact. We must learn to walk lightly and direct our own future.

Obfuscation by Design

If you've ever had a wonderful teacher in school, you've probably wondered: What is it about this person that makes him/her so good at describing concepts, theories, events, etc.? Great teachers have mastered the art of explaining complicated topics—simply. So, why is our society so incredibly complicated? Life is pretty simple. Humans have pretty basic wants and desires and hopes and dreams. Yet, we are surrounded by this maelstrom.

When people tell me, "it's complicated," my ears prick up. What are they really saying? Is "it" really complicated or is there some obfuscation here? If there is obfuscation, who benefits from it and why? For instance, our tax code has become nearly indecipherable.

The legalese used in contracts, like insurance policies, is unclear by design.

It took the City of North Adams, MA nearly three years to finally pass regulations on short-term rentals. The official reason given was that overlapping and sometimes contradictory and outmoded state building codes had to be wrestled with. When libertarians say we need to rip up a law/regulation every day -- not make new ones -- they have a point. I don't say this because I believe in deregulation. I say it because everybody and their brother has inserted special provisions to try and help themselves; too many interest groups looking for self-serving edits.

We need a full reboot of our tax code. We also need more clarity for Americans who may not be trained in legalese, but need to understand various contracts (e.g. insurance). Yes, the government is in the business of picking winners and losers, but this process has become corrupt. The government used to pick winners based on the public good; now it picks winners based on lobbying, campaign contributions and whether or not you're in their inner circle.

Energy is a key example. Gas, oil, coal and nuclear have enjoyed massive subsidies for years. Meanwhile, we all understand that it's in the public interest to support wind, solar and renewables. The same is true of the meat industry. We all know that it's better for our health and more humane to eat fruits, vegetables and grains, but the sick and twisted meat industry gets the money instead.

Regarding taxes, it's hard to even delve into this because it's all so cloaked, but we know that landlords and corporations can engineer losses on paper to reduce their taxes. Also, long-term capital gains and qualified dividends are typically taxed below wages. There are so many vehicles for the rich to hide and shelter money, reduce liability

and effectively separate themselves from their money, it would take an investigative journalist to find all of the tendrils.

Rather than burying advantages in the tax code, we should just pass clear legislation to support social programs. The reason why the wealthy and powerful keep it in the tax code, is that no one would ever create a social program to help the rich. Can you imagine the bill: “Increasing the Wealth of the Rich,” a bill with bipartisan support, contact your legislator today! Take the murkiness out. Once all of these advantages have been stripped from the tax code, there will be plenty of money to tackle real social ills (like the new wave of gambling addiction and insider trading created by prediction markets).

I would accept a slightly regressive tax scheme if we could just strip away all of these built-in advantages and loopholes. Then, we could at least see what we’re working with—get rid of the clutter. Once that is done, we could have a real debate about how progressive or regressive American taxes should be. But first, clear the deck! A child tax credit makes sense because, again, it’s in the public interest to bring up the next generation. That is the core question we need to ask of any tax initiative: Does it serve the public good?

Public policy suffers from the same problem. It has been directed towards special interests and away from the public good. The “Big Beautiful Bill” is 860 pages long. Most congressmen and women probably never even read it. They have to rely on summaries from their legislative directors, which certainly can’t cover everything. When you create a tome like this, it’s understood that you are creating a giant smoke screen for certain provisions.

Beyond that, the naming of bills and the lack of focus in legislation is an issue. We shouldn’t allow sponsors to name their bill using PR. We should identify bills with docket numbers, not spin. But also, we

should not allow unrelated items to be added to bills because this encourages all kinds of horse-trading. It's unfair to say x, y, z senator voted against the "Help Our School Children Act" (fictitious name) when he/she voted against it because someone added a ridiculous unrelated giveaway to some special interest. Keep legislation focused and remove the PR labels.

To back up for a moment, it's worth looking at literacy because understanding our tax code; legislation; contracts; or financial and legal vehicles, is very much related to this. The first issue of this zine was about the need for broader and free literacy, undergraduate education, available to all. There are many reasons to support this, but a big one has to do with this very discussion. Before we can simplify and strip away the incredible advantages that the wealthy have build into the system, we need understanding.

Ever since Citizens United, we have been struggling with a system where money directs our priorities as a society rather than being led by the public good. Money is clearly not speech, but that is the legal opinion of the Supreme Court. So, here we are. Chomsky, Nader and Zinn have warned for decades that the logical progression of the American experiment involves the corporate takeover of government. We have seen this happen. How will we respond to this?

If we created simple transparent easy to understand systems, there would be less corruption, less obfuscation, less hidden items buried in legislation and the tax code. This doesn't mean we need to remove all complexity. As I said at the beginning, great teachers present complex concepts simply. We need short concise legislation that congressmen and the public actually read; the same is true of our tax code. Maybe we need an actual simplification bill that sets parameters.

Right now, we have lobbyists who meet with congressmen and women, pay for access and drop off actual verbiage—lines to be included in bills. That's ridiculous. Does the general public have that kind of access? We should give corporations and special interests the same access that the general public has now. They can write letters, make phone calls, send emails. If a meeting is granted, they absolutely should not be accepting text to add to a bill.

To summarize, we need a full reboot of our tax code and legislative process. We should accept a slightly regressive tax code in the spirit of compromise, but in return, remove the various built-in benefits for landlords, corporations and the rich. Raise the literacy level of all Americans to increase their understanding of what is truly occurring in America right now. Get rid of overlapping and outdated regulations. Require that insurance companies succinctly spell out policy coverage; if legalese is used, include a clear synopsis in plain language. (With health insurance, in particular, what's covered is often a great mystery—until the bill arrives.) Do not allow legislators to use PR titles for bills; do not allow unrelated items in bills. Work to repeal Citizens United as money is polluting the political system. Redirect government spending (subsidies, legislation, etc.) and priorities towards the public good, not special interests looking to wield the power of government to enrich themselves. Keep legislation short, under 100-pages is a good guideline. And remember, when there's obfuscation, a glut of seeming information or someone tells you, "well, it's complicated..." ask yourself three questions: Is it really complicated? And, who benefits and why?

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