



Michigan COMMENTARY

The Agenda of the Future

by Gerald A. Faverman, Ph.D., and David L. Kimball

We have, we hope, come to the end of the Alice-in-Wonderland phase of the budget stalemate between the executive and legislative branches of Michigan government. Partisan myopia, posturing, and ideological cant stymied for far too long concrete negotiations between Democrats and Republicans. While the recently agreed-to settlement will buy time, it will not resolve Michigan's increasingly serious fiscal crisis, which likely will continue for an additional thirty months.

The commotion and hullabaloo emanating from Lansing have obscured the fundamental reality that the easy times are behind us. It is important to acknowledge the difficulties, challenges, and realities that we face as a community in a much more difficult world.

As a state, and as a nation, we must become more competitive, productive, efficient, knowledgeable, and skilled. Easy enough to say; harder to do. Government, which has been for sixty years the leading force for social improvement and change, can no longer unilaterally solve society's problems: Even if we knew all the answers, we couldn't afford to implement the solutions. Finally, and most discouraging to Americans, an impatient people, the problems we face are going to take a generation to fix.

The partisan dialog in Lansing over program funding cuts might lead one to believe erroneously that Michigan's social institutions could remain insulated from the hurricane of change that is assaulting Fortress America. Alas, this is not true, and postponement of the required reforms will only increase the pain and the price of the ultimate solutions.

The nation's businesses have already faced squarely the unpleasant and frightening realities of global competition and more limited resources. Car manufacturers, computer makers, banks, savings and loan institutions, airlines, retailers, hotels, and hospitals have been banged around, fighting to survive as leaner and less profitable entities. The face of the workplace of America is changing radically. It is not certain whether businesses will have the energy, the will, or the know-how to undertake greater sacrifices to maintain our historical leadership and economic supremacy in the face of determined, intelligent, and productive industries overseas. America's private sector—having no choice—is already fully engaged in a Darwinian conflict of the survival of the fittest; not just in the nation, but in the world.

So where is government? Light years behind business. In Michigan, as in the nation, politics of late have inappropriately emphasized the negative values of polarization, pitting Americans against each other based on race, color, creed, geography, class, and gender. The short-term advantages for both political parties in this endeavor mask a major danger for the future of Michigan and the nation. Simply put, fractional strife is counterproductive; we cannot compete effectively as a people divided. Government needs to lessen its partisan and polarizing thrust and attend to badly needed reforms giving citizens a leaner bureaucracy and a broader vision. We need to get on with the agenda of the future.

We must begin a strategic planning process that identifies objectives, sets priorities, allocates the revenue required, and evaluates performance. We must demand that government at all levels transcend the short-term advantage of partisan one-upmanship for the substantive benefit of consensus-driven policy formation and implementation. Given government's conservative bureaucracy, it will be difficult to institute a more rational process to deal with the future—but what other choice do we have?

Settled before highways, aviation, telephones, and satellites, our state needs to accommodate itself to the contemporary technology—as the private sector already has—that will foster decentralized decision-making and greater responsiveness for citizen-consumers. At a minimum, the following must be included in Michigan's agenda of the future:

- **New economic activities** that will replace our declining automotive and related manufacturing industries, nurture the growth of these new industries, facilitate their investment, train their labor force, and educate their management and research talent.
- **New educational entities** that will replace our declining, inefficient schools of yesterday with intellectually and technologically relevant programs to mobilize the genius of our nation, allocate appropriate new resource to this enterprise, institute performance and evaluation criteria that will maximize accountability, and encourage a renaissance of the American scientific and technological research enterprise.
- **New government structures** that will replace our archaic governing procedures with streamlined, sensitive mechanisms that take advantage of the ongoing revolution in information technology.
- **New policy approaches** for health care and the environment, two areas where the traditional American notion of limitless resource and unlimited access demands reassessment.
- **New public policy responses** to issues of our children and our elderly. How well these groups are treated in our governance is the clearest possible reflection of our values.

Struggle and sacrifice are inescapable. Government must be bold; its leadership must find the courage to invent new ways of conducting the public's business.