

Minnesotans Shrug Off the Shutdown

What if they had a government shutdown and nobody cared? That about sums up what's just happened in Minnesota.

The fiscal year ended on June 30, and since then all but "essential" services of government have been closed down. Even most state websites have been taken offline.

For the past two weeks, a struggle raged within the confines of the Minnesota state Capitol, pitting perhaps the most liberal governor in the country against a newly elected Republican majority. Gov. Mark Dayton, elected by the slimmest of margins (a recount was necessary to determine his victory), faced off against a state legislature swept into office by the power of the tea party movement.

On Thursday, Mr. Dayton threw in the towel, largely accepting Republican demands to balance a \$34 billion state budget without raising taxes.

The divisions could not have been more stark. The governor's allies insisted that it would be immoral to balance the budget "with cuts to services upon which Minnesotans depend" -- hence Mr. Dayton opposed what he called an "all cuts budget." Republican legislators insisted that raising any taxes in the midst of a devastating recession would be irresponsible, and they refused.

The battle should have been epic, but most Minnesotans were merely annoyed. Indeed the most serious concern that average citizens (and bar owners) seemed to have was that without a budget resolution, the legal supply of beer and cigarettes would soon run out because regulatory enforcement was deemed "essential," while regulatory permitting was not. Permits to purchase alcohol from distributors expire annually and cigarettes require tax stamps, both unavailable during the shutdown. Fishing permits were similarly affected, evidence that for most people it's not the government's services that matter most to daily life, but its annoying restrictions.

For Mr. Dayton it was not supposed to end this way. The budget battle, and especially the shutdown, was to provide a teachable moment in which Minnesotans' eyes were to be opened to the necessity of government. After eight years of Tim Pawlenty's chipping away at the welfare state, Mr. Dayton wanted to return to the 1970s' "Minnesota Miracle," when taxes were high, government grew, and everybody was above average.

"I'm asking the wealthiest Minnesotans to pay a little more in taxes so that children with special needs don't have to be denied services," he asserted this week. And "that's a Minnesota value."

The shutdown, in other words, was expected to outrage Minnesotans enough to get them to stand up and fight for their government goodies.

Mr. Dayton was not alone in this expectation. Alliance for a Better Minnesota, a liberal interest group backed by big labor that spent millions to elect him last fall, committed a million more to an advertising campaign to convince Minnesotans that Republicans were going to destroy all things good. That is, unless Mr. Dayton saved the day by mulcting \$2.7 billion more in taxes from higher-income taxpayers.

It was wasted money.

In many ways the budget battle in Minnesota represented one of the last stands of old-style liberalism. The underlying dispute was not about how much to spend on what government service, but rather on the role of government itself. Mr. Dayton's vision and battle plan were based upon the obvious superiority of a caring welfare state and the moral virtue of making "the rich" pay their "fair share." Mr. Dayton, in other words, was fighting for income redistribution.

Republicans had no such grand ideal, but what they lacked in vision they made up for in realism. Elected on a wave of disgust with government meddling in the economy and people's lives, they had the will to stick to their guns and insist: enough, no more.

In this the Republicans reflected more accurately the electorate's mood. Our faith in government's management skills is exhausted after two years of disastrous national leadership. Only a few socialist holdouts truly believe government can provide a "just" distribution of goods by tweaking the tax code.

Democratic governors across the country have been accommodating themselves to the new fiscal constraints imposed by the economic downturn, because they must. Mr. Dayton chose to make a last stand for the moral vision of liberalism, counting on the support of average Minnesotans to embrace it.

Instead, they shrugged. As long as they could get their beer and cigarettes, government could stay shut for all they cared.

"Mr. Dayton chose to make a last stand for the moral vision of liberalism, counting on the support of average Minnesotans to embrace it... Instead, they shrugged."