

How to Explain Government to an Alien (from Outer Space, not Mexico)

'Greeting human being, I've traveled across space to check on the progress of your species.'

'Cool. Shall I take you to our leader?'

'Your what?'

'Our leader, the guy in charge.'

'The guy in charge of what?'

'Well, in charge of everything.'

'You have one guy in charge of everything?'

'No, no. He's in charge of Government.'

'What is 'Government'?'

'Well, Government makes the rules for us. It tells us what we can do, and what we can't do.'

'So, Government is really smart? They come up with wise rules for you to follow?'

'Well, mostly. But some of its rules really are stupid.'

'Do you disregard those rules?'

'No we have to follow the rules, even if they are stupid or we disagree with them. Government punishes anyone who disobeys the rules.'

'So, you are a slave to government?'

'No, no. It's not like that at all. Government works for us, the people. It serves us. We are the boss.'

'It tells YOU what to do. And it punishes YOU with violence if you disobey it. And, yet, you're its boss?'

'Yeah.'

'But there are some things government does that you don't like?'

'Well, yeah. Not everything government does is popular. Like, spending on wars, for example.'

'What is a 'war'?'

'It's when the Government spends the people's money on weapons and soldiers and sends them over to the other side of the world to kill a bunch of people over there and destroy their country. I don't like that the Government does this.'

'Well. I can see why you might not like that. Have you humans reached the stage where you generally consider stealing, enslaving, and killing each other to be ... bad things?'

'Oh, yeah! We know that! Don't steal. Don't attack. Don't assault.'

'But you give money to Government and they use it to kill people.'

'Umm, yeah. But the Government does good things with tax money as well.'

'Why don't you stop paying for the things you don't like, and only pay for the good things it does?'

'No, we can't do that. You can't just decide to stop paying taxes because the rules say that everyone has to pay taxes.'

'But the rules come from Government, don't they?'

'Yes.'

'So Government made the rule which said everyone has to pay the money?'

'Yes'

'So, everyone pays taxes because if they didn't Government would punish them using violence?'

'Yes, but most people don't mind paying taxes. Most people feel obligated to pay taxes and obey Government laws because it's for the good of society. Society needs Government so that means we all must pay taxes.'

'So, just to make sure I've got this straight. Government makes the rules and you feel obligated to follow the rules, even the ones you don't like. And it tells you what to do and threatens to punish you if you don't do what it says, and it uses some of the money it takes from you using threats of violence to pay for things you don't like, and actually think are immoral like, mass murder.'

'Yes, but we can ask it to please tell us to do smart things like, please don't use our money to kill people. We're allowed to ask them to tell us to do what we want them to tell us to do.'

'Are you guys just scared of this thing? Is Government some huge monster which can just squish you at any moment if you disobey?'

'No, Government isn't a monster.'

'Well, what is it then? Can you draw me a picture of it?'

'Government isn't really the sort of thing you can draw a picture of.'

'Maybe you can take me to it. Where is Government?'

'You mean the buildings?'

'Government is a building?'

'No, but the politicians who make up the Government have buildings they work from.'

'So, Government is a group of these politicians?'

'Yes'

'OK. Then what species are these politicians?'

'They're human.'

'Like you??'

'Yeah'

'So, politicians are human and they're Government. You're human, but you're not Government.'

'No'

'So it's the politicians they're the ones that boss the rest of you around and make you do things you don't want to do and take your money using threats of violence. But, even though you're all humans you're not allowed to boss them around and take their money?'

'No, they'd put us in a cage if we did that. But, look, it's not like the politicians can just do whatever they want. Like, a politician can't just come up to me on the street and make me give him money. They can't do that. Politicians can only do things like that in their job when they are working for Government.'

'Oh, so politicians aren't Government. They just work for Government.'

'Yeah'

'OK. So, Government isn't a monster, and it isn't a building, and it's not politicians. It's something else. But it employs politicians, who are just regular humans who get to boss everyone else around and take their money. How does a regular human become a politician?'

'Well, that's the great thing about our Government. It's a Democracy. And that means that the people actually have the power because we get to decide who among us get to be politicians. We get to vote! If a politician starts doing things we don't like we can just replace them with someone else in the next election.'

'So the people that get chosen to be politicians only get to boss people around and take their money for a short time, and then they go back to being regular humans?'

'Exactly'

'Sounds like a powerful position to be in. But if you get to choose who does that I assume that politicians are always the wisest, most honest, caring and perspective people among you.'

'Well, no, not really. I wouldn't say politicians are known for being honest or wise or caring. And they're certainly not the most respected people among us. Come to think of it, most politicians are lying power hungry crooks.'

'The ones YOU chose?'

'Yeah, they're always doing things we don't like. They use taxpayers money to enrich themselves and their friends. And they never keep their promises to voters. They've been caught stealing and lying and taking bribes. And they mostly do what the big corporations want. Yeah, they're always doing stuff like that. They're completely corrupt. They're a bunch of lying crooks.'

'But, you said that most humans know that stealing and beating each other up and killing are wrong. And you said you have the power because you can change who's in charge. So why don't you just replace the lying, thieving, murderous, crooked politicians with some regular people.'

'Well, we don't try to elect lying crooks. It just turns out that way. But we have to have a Government because some humans are nasty and they might kill or enslave or steal civilization just couldn't survive without Government.

'Let me get this straight. Because you are worried about the small number of nasty people who are willing to kill and enslave and steal, you think it is necessary for your survival to have a system where some humans among you for a short while get to call themselves the Government and they get to order everyone else around like slaves, and if they want commit mass murder overseas, using money they stole using threats of violence. Politicians get to enslave and kill and steal because if they didn't ... someone else might? And you try to elect good honest people to be politicians but what happens every time is that the people you elect turn out to be corrupt evil lying crooks; that's your system?

'Yup. That's pretty much Government.'