

The Three Ages of Government

From the Personal, to the Group, to the World

For much of history, people have been treated as subjects to those with political and economic power and wealth. It is only in the last 250 years that people (in some parts of the world) have become citizens as opposed to subjects. This change happened in a very short period, between 1780 and 1820, when the foundation for democracy was laid. This was also the basis upon which a century later, local governments responded to rapid industrialization, urbanization, and population growth.

During the twentieth century, all democratic governments came to perform a range of tasks, functions, and services that had no historical precedent. In the thirty years following the Second World War, Western democracies created welfare states that, for the first time in history, significantly reduced the gap between the wealthy and the rest. Many of the reforms of that postwar period have been rolled back since then because of the belief that government should be more "businesslike".

The changes in the role of government in society have been massive in the past 250 years, and so little is known about why. Jos C.N. Raadschelders examines the questions that citizens should have about their connections to government, why there is a government, what it does, how it does it, and why we can no longer do without government. What is Government? rises above stereotypical thinking about government.

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