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Selling the State, to Help the State **by Scott McPherson**

Maryland's governor-elect Bob Ehrlich has a great idea: sell off state-owned properties. The bad news is, he wants to use the money to plug a \$1.8 billion budget shortfall rather than give it back to taxpayers and reduce the size of state government.

Maryland is among the most socialistic states in the Union. Like New York and California, it boasts a massive welfare state and "progressive gun control" (and one of the highest crime rates in the country, but that's another story), and its representatives to Congress are some of the most left-leaning in the country. Not surprisingly, Maryland's bloated bureaucracies and myriad government programs are suffering in the recent economic slowdown as state leaders in Annapolis scramble to fill the coffers of a \$21 billion leviathan.

As a result, soon-to-be governor Ehrlich is taking inventory of all state-owned assets, such as buildings and land, to be considered for auction to raise the funds needed to fill the gap between the state's current tax revenues and its expenditures. According to the *Washington Times*, Ehrlich "believes hundreds of millions of dollars could be raised by selling assets ranging from underused parcels of land to the 28-story William Donald Schaefer Tower ... in downtown Baltimore." "All options are on the table once the inventory is complete," said Henry Falwell, Ehrlich's spokesman.

Not surprisingly, even the state's Democrats appear to be on board with the proposal. The *Times* reports, "Mr. Ehrlich has ruled out raising income or sales taxes to address the shortfall, meaning he will have to cut state programs drastically or find other sources of revenue." At a time when many families are struggling to make ends meet like never before, even tax-happy leftists recognize a good thing when they see it. The mean old Republican governor will take the blame for auctioning off highly valuable property (Maryland owns approximately 60 million square feet of office space and tens of thousands of acres of land, which has many potential developers

salivating), while the welfare state can remain intact without raising taxes or reducing government spending. It's a win-win, if you like big government.

The trouble is, a great idea is being used to the wrong end. Without a doubt, the state of Maryland (like so many others) could do without an overwhelming majority of its current possessions, and in good times it would take a very brave political leader indeed to talk about selling off government-owned property. In trying times, however, politicians are signing on to the idea just to preserve the status quo of the welfare state.

Ehrlich ought to be using this as an opportunity to show Marylanders the burden that socialistic ideals have placed on their shoulders, which could be removed precisely by eliminating welfare-state programs. Instead, he's staving off the collapse of socialism in his own state with a dose of political entrepreneurship, which is kind of like the Soviet Union's use of private farming to make up for the tragic failure of collectivized agriculture. This behavior shouldn't be applauded; it ought to be called what it is: deceptive. If the economy continues to take a nosedive, what does the governor intend to do then? Don't bet he'll take *that* opportunity to promote the blessings of limited government, the free market, and individual liberty. Then it will be time to raise taxes.

If political leaders want to talk about reducing the amount of property owned by the government, Americans should sit up and take notice, and give them 100 percent support. That is an excellent way to reduce the size and influence of government and to return tax dollars to the people who pay them. But when the motive is to pay for all the failed government programs that bleed and drain taxpayers of their hard-earned cash, and worse, when it is done with the explicit intention of *maintaining* those programs, it's just another political ploy designed to fool the people long enough to win the next election.

Selling off the state should be part of a larger strategy designed to return as much property as possible to private hands, remove government obstacles to economic growth, reduce expenditures, and ultimately lower the tax burden on the individual citizen. State property was paid for by the people, and its sale should mean the return of that money to their pockets. It should not be used to cover the unpaid bills of the very welfare state that is the source of so many of their ills.

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