

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Longman recommends that the federal government shift to "accrual accounting," which would count insurance programs and pensions as part of the deficit. This change would cause sharp increases in the deficit; for example, according to a study by the accounting firm Arthur Andersen & Co., accrual accounting would have caused the fiscal year 1984 federal deficit to increase from \$185.3 billion to \$333.4 billion.

While accrual accounting has its flaws, Longman says, more realistic deficit figures would provoke a "new budget debate" about the "choices and sacrifices that we, as a society, have to make."

Liberty's Story

"The Idea of Liberty and the Dream of Liberation" by Kenneth Minogue, in *Encounter* (July-Aug. 1987), 44 Great Windmill St., London W1V 7PA, United Kingdom.

In recent years, argues Minogue, a political scientist at the London School of Economics, intellectuals have increasingly used "prison theories" to describe political life in Western democracies. Citizens, they argue, are "imprisoned" (by race, gender, tradition) and must be "liberated" from these burdens. In Minogue's view, "prison theories" range from the belief that scientific objectivity is impossible to the view that "something called 'society' defines and type-casts us for our roles in life."

Such ideas, however, are not new. They have been part of Western thought since classical times.

In *The Republic*, Plato (428-348 B.C.) used a parable to describe political life. Consider a group of prisoners trapped in a cave. Over time, the prisoners mistake the shadows on the walls of the cave for reality. If a prisoner, Plato said, was then "hauled . . . into the sunlight, would he not suffer pain and vexation at such treatment?"

The prisoners can only discover freedom by being forced away from the comforts of the cave. As a result of Plato's teachings, Minogue argues, classical philosophers routinely considered life in the *polis* to be "merely a prison-without-walls."

The thinkers who revived classical learning still used Plato's analogies. For example, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) based his "practical realism" on the principle that the Platonic cave accurately describes political life. Karl Marx (1818-1883) composed dozens of works that treated the "history of the modern world" as a "prison-nightmare."

According to Minogue, prison-theories of politics merely cheapen and flatten life. Moreover, prison theorists ignore the ways by which one's political views can be used as a tool to critique—and understand—the views of others. For the ideal political world is not a bland "sunlight" made up of people without belief, but of creatures who exercise their limitations in a world offering access to "more universal points of view."

True liberty, Minogue concludes, cannot be acquired by Platonic means. Rather than being "liberated" by others, the taste for liberty is acquired over the centuries, as independent people freely abandon servility. "There are no 'birthpangs,'" he states, "no 'struggles,' and no 'revolution' by which liberty can be acquired."