

Historical issues of the role of government are discussed in the context of the increase in the number of able older persons. Formulated are a series of significant policy issues which decision-makers may confront as a consequence of demands these able elders may make on the state and the demands that the state and society may make on them.

# Tomorrow's Able Elders: Implications for the State

Robert B. Hudson, PhD<sup>1</sup>

The emergence of a population grouping identified as the able elderly is a remarkable benchmark of social and demographic progress in the industrial world. Not only are first- and second-world countries populated increasingly by older persons, but it is beyond dispute that poverty, frailty, and dependence are no longer the common denominator of these aged populations. Clearly, how those who can be objectively identified as able elders identify themselves, and how they are recognized and conceptualized by the larger society are matters of enormous importance.

Nowhere will the potential importance of this group be greater than in the world of politics. Should able elders emerge with a common consciousness built around age, ability, or other life circumstances, their being a group with vast personal, economic, and social resources would make them, in the parlance of a younger generation, awesome. At the other extreme, however, is the possibility that the future able elderly will have so little in common, will be so numerous, and will have so many identifications with people not so labelled that their differential political impact could be virtually nil.

Whether a clearer political identity for this population can or should emerge will have major consequences for both gerontology and the larger society. The emergence of this group could well result, as able elders and their advocates contend, in massively undertapped resources being applied to better serving families, communities, and older individuals themselves. But it is also critical to recognize that the extent to which collective identity and contributions emerge is a function of social and economic forces as much as it is of individual preference. The contributions these able elders may wish to make can, under foreseeable circumstances, become the obligations that society wishes to impose on them. What able older people choose to do and how larger social forces work to channel (or disregard) their abilities

will depend on a number of cohort characteristics and period conditions. Political mobilization of the able elderly population will likely be tied to their collective sense of discrimination or rejection by employers, community leaders, and politicians, among others. In this potential struggle between group autonomy and societal demands, able elders will want to choose their strategies and labels with care.

In a narrower political vein, it is important to consider the particular interests and concerns around which able elderly individuals might coalesce. Of concern in this regard is that if able elders emerge as "another special interest," what is the interest and which individuals and what needs does it address? Older persons and their organizations have, of course, been very active in the political arena over the past quarter-century. What makes the continuation of these efforts under the guise of the able elderly potentially troubling is that, almost by definition, older persons with current and pressing needs have been factored out of the group and therefore (in the interest group model) out of the claim to benefits. If, as proponents contend, the able elderly population will be devoting considerable political effort to securing benefits for all older persons, especially the frail, the wisdom of fostering a political separation between the able and less able elderly is subject to question.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that the overall older population and its advocates should continue to be a major political presence without endorsing the idea of breaking out the able portion of this population from its remainder. Further discussion of what might be contributed by or lobbied for awaits consideration of what the political attributes of the able elderly population may be in the years ahead.

## Political Potential of the Able Elderly

Three questions posed some years ago by the political scientist Dahl (1958) in the context of the elitist-pluralist debate are useful for considering the potential salience and influence of the able elderly

<sup>1</sup>Professor of Social Welfare Policy, Boston University School of Social Work, 264 Bay State Road, Boston, MA 02215.

population. Dahl's three questions to those positing the presence of a dominant elite in the United States, modified for present purposes, are: Are the able elderly an identifiable group which seeks to further itself in the political world? Is there agreement within the group as to what it wants through government for itself or others? Is what the able elderly want different from what other groups and individuals in the political arena want?

Posing these questions does not lose sight of the fact that there exists a large and growing population of individuals who can be identified as the able old. The pertinent questions center on the political salience of able oldness, both to the individuals classified as such and to the larger society.

### *Identity and Cohesion among the Able Elderly*

There are a number of individual roles and broader sets of life circumstances that could augment identity and cohesion among the able old. Common patterns of work and retirement, similarities in health status, shared concerns about family roles and needs, should they strengthen or emerge, could enhance group consciousness. These failing, able elders might be shown to have common sets of concerns and expectations about the events, vulnerabilities, and protections that await them at very advanced age. The group's definitional property of able need not suggest that unable or less able is necessarily far off or that the group itself is not partially made up of individuals whose life situation is already to some degree precarious. Shared identity could, as well, result from a common need and desire to channel ability, role changes, and time into new productive capacities. Voluntarism, lobbying, or new economic and social tasks could foster a greater common identity.

Concerns, expectations, and roles such as these can contribute to common political identity, but a more decisive political presence for the able elderly people would require the emergence of a more constrained age consciousness or sub-culture identification (Rose, 1965). Currently, there is little evidence that such a pattern of relatively exclusively shared values has developed, but Cutler et al. (1984) cautioning that age consciousness itself may be a cohort phenomenon serves as a reminder not to rule out its emergence.

Conceivably, consciousness will grow around able older persons seeing themselves as something of a political and economic "sandwich generation" caught between the demands of a frailer generation ahead of it and the pressures of a "command generation" (Williamson et al., 1982) immediately behind it. Without being needlessly reductionist, it is important to note that the able elderly population's identification of itself eliminates from "the old" both a significant number of very old or less able elderly and a smaller number of younger-old who are also socially or economically vulnerable. This abstract factoring out process, should it transpire politically, could clearly heighten the group consciousness of

this unquestionably growing number of people appropriately deemed able and old.

As with the political emergence of any other population grouping, the political rise of the able-old will be very much a function of the cohorts, classes, and conditions around them. Should some combination of economic difficulty, budgetary constraints, and age imbalances in the population emerge simultaneously, a distinct possibility to many 25 years hence, the combined sense of relative deprivation and external pressure would serve, among other things, to heighten group identity. This pattern would contrast very considerably with the period 1950–1980, where unprecedented public benefits could be made available to the elderly, able and less able alike, in the absence of strong political identity among the aged. In no account of the major age-related policy enactments of the period, Medicare (Marmor, 1970); Medicaid (Vladeck, 1980); Supplemental Security Income (V. Burke, & V. Burke, 1974); Social Security (Derthick, 1979); Age Discrimination in Employment (Schuck, 1980), has age-based consciousness or age-based lobbying been posited as central to legislative passage. Program expansion during the period occurred as a result of economic growth and the assumptions and expectations that were bound up more generally in welfare state politics. Political success and political identity are very separate phenomena as may eventually be shown by contrasting the events circa 1965–1980 with those circa 2010–2025.

### *Barriers to Able Aged Population Identification*

Although selected circumstances could foster greater political identity and cohesion among the able elderly, separate identities and relatively low levels of current need suggest more modest developments in this direction. Most obvious are the countervailing effects of class, ethnicity, sex, and other personal characteristics. Given the millions of persons in the objective group classification, population variation approaches that of the citizenry at large. This certainly holds for political participation and orientations where the within-group variation at any point in time runs close and parallel to the general population (Campbell & Strate, 1981; Hudson & Strate, 1985).

It is possible that a given cohort of able older persons might disproportionately possess the wealth and education associated with conservative or Republican politics. But even their being able and old would be secondary; more important, it would be transient. In fifteen years, this cohort might well remain disproportionately Republican, but these would be increasingly frail Republicans. The cohort that follows might also be able, but its political makeup and salience would be a function of other important personal characteristics and period characteristics.

It is also possible to argue that factoring out the less able (definitionally or programmatically) would reduce population heterogeneity in a manner func-

tional to political participation. There are data, however, indicating that it is more the characteristics associated with the less-able elderly that are associated with subjective age identification. Widowhood, declining sense of competence, impaired health status, and financial decline have each been tied to increased age identity, whereas the positive responses associated with able elderly individuals have been negatively related to such identity (Cutler, 1973; Linn & Hunter, 1979; Peters, 1971; Ward, 1977). In a more directly political vein, old-age identifiers among the elderly have been shown to be less politically involved than non-identifiers (Miller et al., 1980). On the other hand, there is a greater sense of efficacy among the younger (and presumptively more able) old than among the very old.

In addition to the within-group differences among the old, there are between-group similarities between the young and old that mitigate against a distinct and influential role for the able elderly. Older persons' political values, orientations, sense of efficacy and trust, political participation, and even most specific issue positions are very much in line with younger persons. There are of course variations, some reasonably significant, but population characteristics other than age account for more of older persons' positions and activities than does age alone.

### *The Able Elderly Over Time*

Of particular importance to this discussion is that where age or date of birth does account for variations between younger and older populations, it often can be laid more to cohort than life-cycle or aging effects. This, in turn, introduces a longitudinal dimension, which is absolutely essential to assessing the future role of the able elderly population.

Who the able elderly are, how they are defined, what their potential needs and contributions are, and, most importantly, what place they hold in society will be in continual flux. More educated cohorts of the able elderly will see and act in the world differently than less well educated cohorts; able older women will demand and assume roles that might not suit either their mothers or daughters; and relatively large cohorts of objectively defined able elders will face pressures and make demands noticeably different from relatively small "golden" cohorts, such as that (especially men) born between the mid-1930s and mid-1940s. The overarching issue is captured by Bengtson et al. (1985) observing that "age-strata are cross-cut by the flow of successive cohorts."

Over time, demographic, social, and economic trends will unavoidably lead to major shifts in what might be termed, following from Estes (1979), "the social construction of the able elderly." As has happened before (Graebner, 1981), an industrial economy in need of human resources will modify its labor policies to encourage labor force participation among those who might well be called the able elderly. It might, as well, force participation among

the not so able elderly through further disability policy restrictions, pension plan modifications, and so forth. In turn, the economic system, however managed, will force or induce such individuals out of the labor force as conditions warrant.

Similarly, in times of governmental budget constraints, it can be fully expected that able older persons will be called on by government and others to assume responsibility for health and other forms of care for the less able in their families and communities. Increasingly the able elderly would also be called on to look after their own needs, either currently or in the future. Economic, social, and political forces prevailing at different times will very much influence the definition of ability.

For the able elderly, social and economic pressures will cut two ways. Intensive social demands could easily enhance a sense of in-group solidarity as a collective sense of discrimination, burden, and obligation lead able elders to see themselves scapegoated (Binstock, 1983) with an intensity not yet seen. Under such circumstances, the able elderly population could be transformed quite easily from a potential to an actual group.

The very pressures that could help generate group solidarity among the able old, however, are the same ones that could make policy enactments or other forms of success difficult for the able-old to accomplish. Multiple demands for limited resources, governmental or other, will limit the degrees of freedom enjoyed by the able old and require levels of cohesion and mobilization this group has not yet demonstrated. The degree to which able elders choose to come together for their own benefit, as contrasted to their sense of having to come together for their own protection, will be an important process to watch and to understand. So too will be seeing what issues generate group solidarity and the groups' success in seeing their positions adopted.

### **Political Agendas of and for the Able Elderly**

The recent emergence of the able elderly population is a major development both because of the size and growth of this population and because only now are many able elders and others in the larger society grappling with who they are, what they want, and what might be expected of them. Having addressed the range of circumstances that might make the able elderly population more of a self- and socially-defined group, attention is turned to some political and policy implications of fostering a new and separate identification.

The issue of how to conceptualize, label, and subdivide the aged has been a thorny one within the gerontological community for some years. The heterogeneity of the older population has grown as fast as the population itself, and the current generation of gerontologists has taken pride in pointing to the diversity and richness of America's elders. Concepts such as the productive or able elderly have the merit of addressing the diversity question and its consequences directly, putting questions of rights and

responsibilities in full view. Nowhere have the multiple images of aging relating to the idea of an able elderly population been put in sharper relief than in Douglas Nelson's (1982) superb essay in the Neugarten volume, *Age or Need?* Writing of the aging advocacy movement, Nelson noted the conflicting images used to characterize older Americans:

... as dependent or independent, as appropriately retired or inappropriately excluded from work; as isolated or socially integrated; as frail or vigorous; as impoverished or affluent; as deserving of special status or subject to arbitrary discrimination; as ill or well, and so on (p. 139).

The able elderly concept captures the reality of a growing number of older persons who are integrated, vigorous, affluent, subject to discrimination, and well. They are here, they are new, and what, if anything, should they and others do about it?

There are a number of concerns associated with constructing and legitimizing a new population defined as able and old. A first concern centers on reification and labelling. Whatever working definition of able old people might be developed, it will bring with it serious ramifications for social and policy purposes. Working assumptions about the able old will be forthcoming on both an overt and covert basis, with problems ranging from new stereotypes to formal misclassification following closely. Invidious comparisons, categorizing, sorting, and discrimination that could occur in government, the work place, the hospital (both worker and patient), housing complexes, and senior centers, among others, are almost nightmarish to consider.

If formalization of the able elderly concept may hold problems for the less able old, it could, in the name of creating opportunities, create additional ones for those who may very properly be considered able. In the area of employment, the able elderly concept brings into sharp relief the disjuncture between desires to eliminate mandatory retirement and to take early retirement. Individuals and groups proclaiming ability and independence must be prepared to face the consequences should economic and budgetary conditions dictate higher rates of employment among this population segment. In the areas of income support and medical care, the improved educational and economic status associated with the able elderly population will generate new proposals with respect to the self-financing or private-financing of pension and health benefits. In the social services, the able elderly concept could lead to stricter and tighter rule-making directed toward the targeting-of-services concept, resulting in the imposition of more means-tested and needs-tested standards.

More generally, the able elderly concept contributes to and is affected by three major contemporary governmental and societal trends: privatization, decentralization, and informalization. Each of these has been noted separately by numerous commentators, but there are broad implications, especially for able older people, when they are taken together. In politics and social welfare, privatization connotes reduced reliance on government, decentralization

suggests a reduced role for Washington, and informalization envisages a turning away from rules, regulations, and administrative structures in favor of reliance on family, neighborhood, and community ties.

In the case of the able elderly, privatization suggests increased utilization of such financing mechanisms as Individual Retirement Accounts, long-term care insurance, continuing care residential options, and equity and other forms of asset conversion. Decentralization will place greater responsibility on states and localities to both define community needs and provide resources. Informalization will have particular consequences for the able old, calling upon them to arrange, provide, supervise, and monitor services to family and community members.

In short, it is not difficult to see that the concept of the able old is consonant with this tripartite set of social and political values. The danger lies in the concept of the able old being fostered in places and times where it is not reflective of existing population characteristics. The present danger is for the poor, frail, and isolated, who risk being further segregated; the future danger awaits today's able old persons who, for whatever reason, are not sufficiently providential.

The notion of the able elderly must not be applied with a simplicity that exacerbates its two most troublesome features: logically separating out and relegating to a totally dependent status the remainder of the older population and the implicit cross-sectional and static definition. In either of these ways the concept of the able old can prove problematic for the able and frail alike, putting the one in a socially stereotyped role and placing potentially excessive burdens on the other.

The potential of making the frail elderly a socially residual category while elevating able elderly people into a role associated more with the mainstream leads to a concluding comment about the relative place of class and citizenship in the contemporary American welfare state.

As cogently argued by Myles (1984), the major welfare state development of the past 50 years affecting the elderly has been the evolution of old-age assistance into the retirement wage. Borrowing from Marshall (1963), Myles explored the ongoing tension between class and citizenship as bases of social organization and how that tension has led to a paradoxical joining of the capitalist economy and the protective state. The contradictory but mutual co-existence of economic liberalism and political democracy helped generate a welfare state that has been long enduring, multiply functional, and remarkably similar across time and nations. Claims for resources came to be made in part on the grounds of citizenship beyond those based on class made through the wage system.

The hybrid result in the case of public pensions is that today they meet neither the test of equity (relationship to contributions, or the wage system) nor of equality (relationship to other citizens). The balance however, between the tensions of class and citizenship in the 30-year period following World War II

shifted in direction of the latter. These citizenship pressures during a period of remarkable economic growth helped generate what Myles (1984) termed "the citizens wage"; that is, the share of the social product workers were able to lay claim to as a deferred wage "over and above any claims they may have possessed in their capacity as wage earners."

As these macro-level institutions and overall economic growth helped generate the expanded welfare state, they also helped to give birth to the elderly as a political constituency. Over time, the elderly (and their families) came to see cause and common ground in a citizenship role around pensions and allied concerns where they had often been found redundant or undervalued in their capacity as workers. As Myles and others have observed, however, countertrends have emerged over the past decade, shifting the institutional balance more toward liberalism and class and away from citizenship and democracy. Supporting evidence is found not only in contemporary budgetary, demographic, and economic analyses, but also very much in the cited trends toward privatization, decentralization, and informalization.

Politically, these trends threaten the institutional base of the contemporary welfare state as it benefits the elderly. A shift away from citizenship toward class as the basis of social organization impinges on each of the factors that can be cited as contributing to the development of today's age-related social policies (Hudson & Strate, 1985): the presumed legitimacy of allocations to the old on the basis of age, the involvement of key elites in focusing on the elderly to inaugurate and expand social programs, the set of expectations and assumptions generating the pattern of expansion by increments, and the standing and agendas of the organized aging in the corridors of government.

However these new realities are evaluated, the concept of the able elderly appears as a creature of its times. Not only are there demonstrably more able older persons, but their abilities, independence, and preferences can associate them more with the forces of liberalism and class than with democracy and citizenship. Able elders can be economically productive, can contribute to their communities, and can help their families. All of this they can do in the context of the market and the community, and only secondarily need they turn to the polity and government.

Assessment of the renewed place of the market is very much a function of values, perspectives, and stakes. Those who have long opposed expansion of the American welfare state will see the presence of the able old as a *prima facie* case for reducing or eliminating policy benefits such individuals have been receiving. Eliminating policy benefits would require the use of either an age proxy (delaying eligibility for benefits), or economic and/or functional means-testing. For their part, aging advocates will be pressed to justify their support for an increas-

ing number of persons who do not evidence demonstrable need. Although a combination of compassion, constituency pressure, and continuing levels of unmet need will continue to undergird existing programs, the rationales employed by advocates will stand in need of further honing. Only those committed to the idea of social citizenship will rest secure in their arguments, standing for rights-based rather than needs-based benefits and for progressivity in generating program revenues rather than restrictiveness in determining program eligibility.

The incontrovertible point is that the able elderly concept is or can be made part of the recent larger period occurrences discussed by Myles (1984). The connection can be as openly political as that made by the organizers of the 1981 White House Conference on Aging or it can be in the form of able elders being involved in any number of productive and worthwhile roles. But the ascendance of able elderly persons as a self-identified and socially-promoted population will also contribute to an erosion of social citizenship and the citizen's wage based upon it. There is a real danger that, in celebrating the rise of the able elderly, we allow institutional commitments to the old as citizens to be transformed into residual programs for the very old as social outliers.

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