

January 6, 2021

*[This was written before Trump-incited rioters attacked the U.S. Capitol. The shock and heartbreak of that day will stay with me the rest of my life. Healing that sadness, and the anger and bitterness of so many of our fellow Americans (and Vermonters), is the work ahead of us. President Biden has made a good start.]*

Vermont's 76th biennial session of the General Assembly began meeting today.

Coping with the coronavirus pandemic and its economic fallout will be at the top of the agenda, of course. Projected budget gaps in General Fund and Education Fund will make new initiatives difficult.

Yet the pandemic has exposed shocking weaknesses in systems we depend on.

Service companies depend on paying workers low wages, yet the whole economy depends on their essential work. People's health care depends on employer-based insurance, yet when jobs stop, so does insurance.

Workers' wages have stalled for 40 years. Most families depend on two income-earners for economic security; yet when childcare and schools close, somebody has to be home with the kids.

Business, education, government and consumers depend on access to the Internet, yet for-profit companies leave huge gaps, especially in rural areas like Vermont.

There is more. Failing mental-health services. Long-ignored underfunding of state colleges. Dysfunctional prison and justice system. And threaded through it all, systemic racism.

Meanwhile, the world literally burns, as the fossil-fueled climate crisis continues to be ignored, even ridiculed. Our Governor, who to his credit respects the science on the covid emergency, has yet to show the same acknowledgement of the climate emergency.

If it wasn't obvious before, it is now abundantly clear that citizens in economic free-fall need government services. A society still stuck in racism, and sexism, needs government standards. A marketplace that ruins the Earth — the ultimate commons for us all — needs government regulation.

“Small government” works in small societies. Human society is no longer small; it is the dominant force on the planet. We must learn to use our government to meet the immense challenges before us.

Because our government is *us*. Its authority derives from the legitimacy of consensus, rather than fiat.

We must use the opportunity presented by our local, national and global crises to rebuild our economy, our environment, and our communities. We must rebuild our systems better. Our great-grandchildren and our common home depend on us.