

# On putting your mouth where the money is...

*The American economy is still reeling like an invalid. A new report from a Presidential commission has drafted a bold recovery plan. How can Congress come together to sell it to the American people? Here's my take on the best starting point....*

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I was reading a [Washington Post oped article about the \(apparent\) political cowardice of the Dems](#), when my eye was drawn to an embedded video of President Obama. Clicking through, I heard him say, *inter alia*, that there must be a “sincere and consistent effort to try to change how Washington operates....”

But, how? Where to start?

With any government, there are many methods to effect change. Money is the lifeblood for all governments; so first, the budget must be scrutinized rigorously. As it so happens, earlier in the week, President Obama's deficit commission released a draft report about how to save Washington and the United States from the road to financial perdition.

Quickly, I availed myself of a copy and read it through, noting with interest that each page had a warning in red: DRAFT – DO NOT CITE. Well, being a draft, I guess I can accept that; things *can* change, as we all know. There are lots of great sounding bulleted points and quite a few graphics (to cut down on words used, of course) **about what sort of things to do to survive**, financially. I couldn't, however, find much **about how to achieve** all the projected cost reductions. Nor could I find what I was really looking for. So, I went through it again until my head hurt. Finally, I decided I needed help....

So I grabbed [Paul Krugman's incisive take on the report](#), titled The Hijacked Commission, noting, with dismay, his summary: “A process meant to deal with the nation's long-run fiscal problems has been hijacked on behalf of an ideological agenda.” Glumly, I read it, and nodded in agreement as Professor Krugman discussed the gamut of smoke and mirrors from The Usual Suspects.

I went back again to the report, hoping Krugman was wrong or simply misinterpreting, when I noticed a key guiding principle on page 4: **“Everything must be on the table – and Washington must lead.”** Then, under the heading Illustrative Discretionary Cuts on page 18, I found this: **“1. Lead by example: Responsibility begins at the top.”** Finally, on page 20, I figured I was getting real close when I read: **“Reduce Congressional and White House budgets by 15%.”** Maybe these guys do mean business, after all? I thought. Three bold and brave statements that together

could add up to a real commitment – the first practical outcome of which could be achieved swiftly, provided the entire Congress agreed.

So – I ask each member of both Houses of the United States: Do you really want to lead by example? Want to reduce the cost of government? Want to convince the American people that you can, indeed, be believed? Want to prove, categorically, that you do mean business? Want to genuinely assist with the financial recovery of The United States of America? Want to be acclaimed as, arguably, the most financially daring and innovative Congress in American history? Do you even want, for Pete’s sake, to help guarantee your own re-election for 2012?

Too easy, mate: stop putting your mouth where the money is, and get off the trough. **In plain terms, forgo your entire salary and perks for the rest of your term in office.** If any members have done that voluntarily already, I applaud their public spirit. Moreover, here’s an historical opportunity to set an example for the rest of the world: pass the necessary legislation to cut salaries permanently, for all members of both Houses hereafter, and for evermore. That’s change at the top that all can see and believe.

Whoa! Before you collapse from laughing, a heart attack, or both, consider this: I’m nowhere near the first person to suggest such a radical step because, according to [US government information](#), **“During the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin considered proposing that elected government officials not be paid for their service.”** I’d hazard a guess and say that Thomas Jefferson probably felt the same way.

To be sure, it’s a symbolic step in part; but all Americans love symbolism. And in politics, perception is everything, is it not?

Not convinced?

Consider this then: according to the above link, the average salary – just *salary* – of the average member is \$174,000 per year. With some arithmetic mashing, that comes to around \$17.5 million for the Senate and \$75.7 million for the House, for a total of just over \$93 million; and that’s *without* adding the higher rates for Senate and House leaders, plus the yearly value of all the perks for all members. I’d say, all up, the yearly total cost for elected members would be \$100 million plus.

That’s serious money, by any measure. So think how much more could be cut from government spending if this suggestion were extended, progressively, **to all state elected representatives.**

Still not convinced? Then consider this question: just *why* do elected members get a salary anyway? Anecdotal and other evidence (e.g. biographical) suggest that many, maybe most, members don’t need it because they’re already independently wealthy *before* they get elected. So, what is the point of salary? Anybody can readily understand that **elected officials must have power** to do the job. But, none *need* public money – they only need *access* to it when necessary.

Before going any further, and just so you know where I'm coming from, I'm an aged pensioner, living frugally in a rented house, with a total pension – according to my last tax assessment – of just over \$13,000 per year. I make a bit extra – a couple of hundred at best – online by selling my ebooks at [my website](#). And I've never been paid for writing and publishing articles online.

Hence, to continue: as a replacement for salary, let me suggest a Congressional Debit Card for each member, **to be used for all personal and job-related expenses and according to prescribed guidelines** and which is audited by the GAO each year – or some other affiliated office. Members who fail to abide by the guidelines will be subject to reductions in retirement income and reduced spending limits; gross violators, though, might be held criminally accountable. On the other hand, members who stay within the guidelines will enjoy *much* increased retirement income over those who don't curtail personal and job-related financial excesses.

Wait up – I can almost hear the Congressional cacophony: only a high salary will attract the best and brightest people to work for the good of the nation. And, and ... well, to have a government department audit all my personal expenses ... well, that's just not right! It's un-American, it's ... it's ... *subversive!*

Here's my reply: Hogwash! Heck – \$174,000 for each member is hardly high salary these days; and the IRS audits everybody, anyway. Look at it this way: having no salary means you don't pay any income tax. Isn't that nice? On the other hand, you don't get any perks. Because, just remember where you are and what you're doing: with salary *or* Debit Card, **you're taking public money** to help with your job of improving and safe-guarding the wealth of the nation. And, after all – nobody ever forced a member to get elected; each is there by voter choice.

So, c'mon: *Just do it!*

A few days ago, [an editorial from the New York Times](#) recognized that “shared sacrifice will be required” to bring this financial mess under control. So, why shouldn't Congressional members do the right thing and, at very least, demonstrate that **they will lead the country** and make their own significant financial sacrifice?

And why do I care, way over here in Australia? For the same reason that, all around this global network, billions of people and hundreds of other governments care: a financially sick United States keeps the whole world sick – and tired. Frankly, as [Howard Beale](#) said, way back in 1976: **“I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!”** Look to the riots, on TV, around the world now, and you'll see that many people think the same....

But something's got to happen first. As NY Times columnist, David Brooks, said to Jim Lehrer on the PBS Newshour on Friday, November 12: “The country's got to change first.” Mr Brooks is fundamentally correct – but only after both houses of Congress lead the way, in my opinion.

If y'all in D.C. do nothing, however, then you risk further entrenching that much-quoted, sardonic *and* accurate comment from one of America's greatest achievers,

Will Rogers: **“America’s got the best politicians money can buy.”** That’s a joke, isn’t it? But, it’s not a joke, is it? Not any more....

So, Mr Harry Reid, Ms Nancy Pelosi, Mr John Boehner, Mr Mitch McConnell: wouldn’t you like to start the ball rolling and prove Will Rogers wrong, once and for all?

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