

# Against common sense

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I stand in opposition to common sense.

Yes, it seems like something it is impossible to oppose. It's like kicking puppy dogs, or thinking pedophiles should have rights. There is just no way to argue with somebody who is presenting a commonsense argument.

Which is what makes the term vacuous, and a shorthand not for *this makes easy sense* but *please don't analyze my thinking too much*, or more simply, *trust me*.

Common sense is anti-intellectual (see entry #173). It is a way of saying, *there are people who thought about this harder than I have, but they shouldn't have*. It is a way of saying that the layperson with a beer in his or her hand should be able to think through even the toughest problems.

Here's a reporter that counted Ms Palin<sup>1</sup> using "some combination of 'solutions,' 'conservative' and 'commonsense' twenty-five times" over the course of a dozen questions. Not to be outdone, Ms Bachmann<sup>2</sup> is the bearer of "the voice of common sense."

It comes up in balancing the budget. From the Common Sense Balanced Budget Amendment Campaign<sup>3</sup>: "We The People believe it is time to force the government to handle its budget like our families have to, by balancing it." After all, it is common sense that debt is a bad thing, and therefore should be avoided. We all know somebody who didn't take that advice, and who is now working to pay off a bad mortgage or servicing a student debt whose monthly payment is only a little more than they make every month.

We've got two problems with our commonsense conclusion. The first is that a government is not a person. I'm going to keep this paragraph short because I know that you know many ways in which sovereign debt differs from your credit card—AAA bonds, levying taxes, obligations to citizens, building hydroelectric dams<sup>4</sup> et cetera.

[Link thanks to techne.]

The second problem with this commonsense notion that debt is bad and must be avoided at all costs is that debt isn't necessarily bad. On a personal level, it's hard to get an education or a house without some sort of debt, so arguing against debt means arguing for a limited education and a lifetime of renting for most folks. For some, that's

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-kelly/sarah-palin-tells-rush-li\\_b\\_361337.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-kelly/sarah-palin-tells-rush-li_b_361337.html)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/06/14/earlyshow/main20070983.shtml>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.bbanow.org/about-common-sense-balanced-budget-campaign>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.ginandtacos.com/2011/06/23/thanks-for-the-oasis/>

the right path; others (myself included, I suppose) are delighted to have a house and a more-than-high-school education.

Even business debt isn't like personal debt. A business that isn't in debt isn't using its assets to its fullest potential.

There's a question of the level of debt, which is much more difficult. What is a reasonable level depends on too many factors for us to easily chat out a solution. Is there a commonsense, folksy way to digest a thousand-page budget report?

None of what I'm writing here really applies to those many citizens and politicians who are saying that the U.S. deficit is out of control and we need to make drastic changes in the big-ticket items like war, social security, and medical billing. Even if the calculus is more subtle than for credit cards, sovereign debt can be irresponsibly used. But politicians often fall into a folksy checkbook-balancing rhetoric to bolster their reduce-the-deficit position, and get their political power from the all-debt-is-bad segment. [Also, I have no respect for anybody who pushes for cuts in minor programs using a budget-balancing rhetoric. To use the personal finance metaphor, cutting a few government bureau offices for the sake of paying down the debt is like cutting out sweets for the sake of paying off a mortgage.]

I wonder how the prevalence of personal debt problems turn into political talking points. Do we see more politicians talking about the commonsense need for the federal government to balance its budget when we have more voters who can't do so? It seems that rhetoric like "we're really held captive by a system which is a debt-based economic system<sup>5</sup>" has more pull when the listener is expected to have his or her own out-of-control debt.

If the big trend in the population over the last few years has been a massive personal debt crisis, it seems almost natural that politicians are now selling themselves on their ability to handle federal debt, so that the federal agenda reflects only seemingly related individual problems.

Let me go back to how a businesses that is growing as quickly as possible is almost by definition in debt. The people who are running a growing business understand that debt isn't the root of all evil, but is a chance to make income today off of a reasonable future obligation. The people in the Common Sense Balanced Budget Amendment Campaign are the people who think the opposite of what the owner of a fast-growing business thinks, who fear the idea of balancing present gains against a future obligation. That group and the politicians who push debt as a pact with the devil have a message tailored for the people who aren't running a growing business, and in fact couldn't even make the right decisions in their personal financial lives.

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<sup>5</sup><http://publicola.com/2011/07/20/publicola-qa-with-dennis-kucinich/>