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## The Budget Deficits Commission

by Murray Comarow

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On February 18, President Obama established the “National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform” to propose ways to reduce our out-of-control deficits. It is co-chaired by Erskine Bowles, Carter’s former Chief of Staff, and former Senator Alan Simpson. The Commission is supported by three reputable non-profit groups, who issued a joint statement on the Commission, asserting that “The key to success is a credible process . . . [which] requires the following:

**First, the commission must be truly bipartisan.**

**Second, it must have a broad mandate.**

**Third, it must have no preconditions.**

**Fourth, it must be transparent.**

**Fifth, its recommendations should be voted on in Congress.**

I agree with all five, but I would add a sixth: The commission must not limit its recommendations to what it believes to be politically realistic.

Unlike presidential or congressional candidates, they are not seeking reelection or campaign funds. They are not restrained by existing law; in fact, it is their duty to recommend statutory changes if necessary. Nor should commissioners be concerned with maintaining good relations with the federal work force or with the interest groups that may be affected by their recommendations. They are not there to represent or protect any of these groups. Their polestar, their organizing principle, should be the public interest, no more and no less.

Notwithstanding their total independence, however, some commissions see their roles as being “realistic” evaluators of what is politically attainable. I suggest that this view of “realism” misconceives and distorts a commission’s unique and powerful role. It is not ~~had~~ to understand why result-oriented *hard* men and women want their recommendations acted upon, and ask: “Why should we waste our time ~~x~~ proposing changes which will be dead on arrival?”

The Commission should set aside political “reality.” First, it’s not their job to make political judgments. Second, they may be wrong. I was involved in two efforts which culminated in the

Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 and the creation of the Environmental Protection Administration. In both cases, the punditocracy said there was no chance of success. Some of my friends ridiculed the two commissions I served for our quixotic quest to beat the unbeatable foes—Congress and the interest groups. They ate crow.

Even assuming that bold recommendations are not likely to be enacted in the short term, there is value in placing such issues on the public agency<sup>DA</sup>. They would attract supporters and opponents and bring on a spirited debate. That's good in a democracy. The Commission should not negotiate with itself.

Two more points, the first being self-evident. A strong staff and adequate resources are imperative. Secondly, no one on the Commission or staff should represent or be beholden to a major stakeholder. Their presence on the Commission will result in efforts to persuade the “neutral” commissioners, distorting its presumably objective approach.

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## **Joint Statement on the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform**

Today, the President formally announced the creation of his National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform. The Commission is off to a good start with the appointment of Erskine Bowles and Alan Simpson as co-chairs. In their prior public service, they have demonstrated the skills and will needed to forge consensus on difficult policy choices.

The Committee for a Responsible Federal Government, The Concord Coalition, and the Committee for Economic Development agree that chronic budget deficits of the size projected even after the economy recovers pose a threat to future standards of living and require prompt, bipartisan attention. For that reason, we urge lawmakers of both parties to work in good faith to develop a comprehensive fiscal sustainability plan. We believe the president's proposed fiscal commission could be an effective mechanism for doing so and that a forum with bipartisan participation would be a productive step toward addressing the nation's unsustainable fiscal path.

The key to success is a credible process. In our view, this requires the following:

**First, the commission must be truly bipartisan.** Any effort to push swift enactment of a partisan agenda would doom the effort to failure. In addition to bipartisan co-chairs, there must be equitable representation.

**Second, it must have a broad mandate.** While it is critical to control the growth of programs such as Medicare and Social Security -- the sources of the long-term problem -- the commission must examine all components of the budget (including discretionary spending, revenues and "tax expenditures") to offset the excessive buildup of debt already underway.

**Third, it must have no preconditions.** If one side sets preconditions, the other will retaliate. All policy options must be open to consideration. All credible proposals should be received with respect and analyzed on their merits rather than with partisan rhetoric.

**Fourth, it must be transparent.** The President and congressional leaders of both parties must ensure that the recommendations receive a full public debate. The public will be more receptive to the necessary hard choices if they can see the process at work.

**Fifth, its recommendations should be voted on in Congress.** Absent this element, the report would join many others on a shelf. It is time to go beyond studying problems and solve them.

Merely forming the commission will be easy, compared to the task of actually solving the nation's fiscal problems. Still, an acceptable commission structure is an essential first step in a process that must begin soon.

In the ideal world, the nation would not need another commission. Congress and the President would simply address the pressing fiscal challenges. And our elected leaders, not an appointed commission, ultimately must make the difficult decisions. However, a bipartisan commission -- with a broad mandate and no preconditions -- could help break the current partisan gridlock, develop a credible marker for action, and open the door for those willing to address the necessary tough choices.

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