Kevin Carson
Good “Big Tents” and Bad
July 17, 2006

Retrieved on 4th September 2021 from mutualist.blogspot.com

theanarchistlibrary.org

Good “Big Tents” and Bad

Kevin Carson

July 17, 2006

If you check the current Blogads in my sidebar, you’ll see one for the Boston Tea Party. Thomas L. Knapp announced its creation in response to what Carl Milsted’s Libertarian Reform Caucus has been doing to the Libertarian Party recently in Portland. The comment thread to Knapp’s blog post on the subject includes some remarks by Milsted, and by Susan Hogarth of the Libertarian Party Radical Caucus. Roderick Long has a post endorsing the Boston Tea Party, as well as the Grassroots Libertarian Caucus.

It’s a shame that things went in this direction, because I’ve been sympathetic to Milsted’s thinking for a long time. I’ve been especially appreciative of his geolibertarian views on land and natural resources.

And I don’t have a problem with incrementalism or “reformism.” It’s unlikely anybody involved in the Boston Tea Party does, since the very fact of organizing to elect candidates and push for dismantling government through government policy implies incrementalism and reformism. Regardless of what end-state you desire, we’re never going to have the option of pushing Leonard Read’s magic button and making government instantly disappear. So what mat-

ters is the direction we're going, not the size of the steps we take to get there.

I even agree in principle with some of what Milsted said in his comment on Knapp's blog thread:

> Historically, the LP has waffled between two different business plans:
>
> 1. A political party designed to move public policy in a libertarian direction by electing libertarians to public office.
>
> 2. A protest organization that keeps shouting what is right regardless of popularity. (This was especially true with the drug war issue.)
>
> The libertarian movement needs BOTH. However, these tasks need to be done by DIFFERENT organizations. Taking stands on unpopular issues results in losing elections. A political party should not be a protest organization. The purpose of a political party is to cash in on the public opinion successes of the protest organizations and think tanks.
>
> Don't waste your time with ballot access and all that overhead. Be an all-out radical protest organization to "speak truth to power" as the progressives say. And as your ideas become mainstream, the new and improved LP can implement them with its large collection of elected, freedom-loving politicians.
>
> PETA, Greenpeace, and Act Up are all effective political organizations. But none of them would be effective as political parties. They are more effective as some of the many factions that make up the Democratic Party.

I can see the argument for the *functions* being separated, but not necessarily the *organizations*. Arguably, the two functions Mil-

sted talks about could be distributed between the Libertarian Party platform, respectively, and the individual candidates. The platform states ultimate goals and statements of principle on specific issues; candidates are free to choose, on prudential grounds, what issues to emphasize and how far to push toward the ultimate goal in a particular election cycle (interestingly, these issues were discussed in a Mutualist Blog post last year: "Selling the Store?" in which Brad Spangler and Thomas Knapp discussed their reactions to the LRC's strategy; Knapp's view of the LRC has changed considerably since then, obviously).

Knapp described a similar distinction in his provisional platform:

> The platform is, however, amenable to incrementalism insofar as it does not specify what particular reductions in the size, scope or power of government the Party will propose and agitate for at any given time. Those decisions are to be made biennially and entirely anew each time in the form of a short (maximum of five points) program. They may be incremental or "giant step" in character — the only condition is that they not contradict the platform…
>
> Finally, the platform is "big tent" in that it does not demand that Party members dedicate themselves, as a condition of Party membership, to a particular end state or to a particular reason or set of reasons for supporting the party's goals. When the "train" of party progress reaches the "station" at which a particular member can no longer support the direction in which the platform points, he or she may simply step off, having never been required to advocate, as a condition of party membership, going any further than he or she wishes to go.

Interestingly, one of the pro-Reform Caucus commenters (Bernard Carman) thought that sounded an awful lot like what the LRC is trying to do.

All that being said, I think Milsted and his group have taken the LP in a fundamentally wrongheaded direction. Milsted's approach toward broadening the party's appeal is about 180 degrees backward. As Knapp asked in a comment at the Libertarian National Committee website,

> Can a "political party" which does not address the policy issues most prominently before the American public truthfully be called a "political party" at all?
>
> If the retention results remain as is (assuming they match the list posted on the LP's blog), and if the convention does not enact replacement planks, then the LP will officially have no position on, among other things:
>
> * foreign policy * military policy * internal security
>
> … which, with immigration, probably constitute the core issues around which the current election cycle revolves.
>
> The party also appears to be dropping nearly every issue of enduring moderate- to high-level interest — Social Security, pollution, etc.
>
> And, finally, the party seems to be dropping what amounts to its heretofore perceived "signature issue" — the one issue on which it has over time garnered increasing credibility and been partially credited with modest public policy successes on: the war on drugs.
>
> It wouldn't have been so bad if this convention had produced clear victory for one faction or another, but what it seems to be producing is a complete muddle

Milsted's "big tent" is not a big tent of these, the *best* of the American electorate, but of the absolute *worst*: SUV-driving soccer moms and upper-middle class "professionals" who are willing to tolerate a little ASI-style phony "market reform," a little "market" discipline for the underclass, so long as the government keeps property values rising and the oil flowing in. What Milsted's version of a "big tent" coaltion is likely to accomplish is tinkering around the edges of the state capitalist system just enough, while leaving its central structure intact, to make it more efficient in serving the ends of ruling elites. In other words, again, the kind of "free market reform" regularly promoted by the ASI. Well, the people who want that already have political homes, and are unlikely to leave them.

The biggest potential "market" for a third party is those within the major parties who are dissatisfied with them. And you can be sure libertarians can't outbid the Democrats and Republicans in competing for voters who are dissatisfied because they're too "radical"–i.e., not managerialist, not corporate centrist, *enough*. Such people are likely to be the last 20% of hangers-on to the state and its corporate clients, right up until the system collapses. Even if we could attract such people, to hell with them. There's no way to attract them without selling our souls.

> — the "reformers" winning just enough to piss off the "purists" and vice versa, and neither faction winning clearly and thoroughgoingly enough to put its own agendas fully into effect.
>
> Before the convention opened, I privately told several friends that I would be surprised if the party could pull itself together enough to right itself financially and still be a functional national organization by Labor Day. Now I'm beginning to wonder if it's even worth the effort to try.

Despite Carman's observations to the contrary, the resemblance between Milsted's and Knapp's attempts at broad coalition building is only superficial.

The kind of broad coalition libertarians should be seeking is one of libertarian and decentralist elements of both left and right; it most certainly should not be based on soccer mom politics and corporate centrism. A good example of a group attempting the former kind of coalition is the Vermont secessionist movement, which has drawn together libertarian-leaning Greens like Kirkpatrick Sale, geolibertarians, and the kind of Main Street paleoconservatives lovingly portrayed by Bill Kauffman. In a related display of cross-pollination, Kauffman and Sale have been appearing in paleo venues like Chronicles and The American Conservative. I proposed something similar in a couple of earlier posts, "Libertarian-Green Tax Reform Alliance" and "A Strategic Green-Libertarian Alliance."

Major parts of the American electorate resent the power exercised over their lives by both big government and giant corporations. My guess is that a large portion of the two big parties' bases share this feeling; the problem is that the respective party establishments divert the sentiment in opposite directions. The GOP establishment channels populist resentment almost entirely against government bureaucrats and liberal intellectual "elites," while falsely

portraying the mega-corporation as the product of sucess in the "free market." The latter spin no doubt sits uneasily on Thomas Frank's Kansans, many of whom are as economically populist as their Wobbly and Socialist ancestors of a century ago, but feel like a captive constituency. The Democratic establishment appeals to anti-corporate populism, but presents an agenda which props up corporatism and hands society over to a welfare and educational establishment dominated by the same managerial elites who control the big corporations.

An emphasis on decentralized government, direct democracy, and a cooperative economy would appeal mightily to those in the bases of both parties who are inadequately served by the respective programs. We have a ready-made audience of people who already have the right values, but have been misled on the practical means of achieving them. The way to approach small government conservatives is to demonize the GOP establishment in terms of its own alleged "free market" values: to portray its state capitalist agenda as one of corporate welfare and crony capitalism, and to point out that the James Taggarts in the corporate headquarters are every bit the contemptible elites as they make out the Volvo-drivers and brie-eaters to be. The way to approach the anti-corporate left is to reveal the role of finance capital in framing the basic structure of their "progressive" state, and show that government is the *cause* of plutocracy and corporate rule, not the *solution.*

We need to show these people how liberty promotes their values. As Roderick Long wrote in a comment at the Boston Tea Party Blog,

> "A platform based on the realization that there are other important values in addition to the non-initiation of force. Freedom is extremely valuable, but it is not the only value."
>
> I actually agree with this and think it's important, but I suspect I mean something different by it from what the LRC does. What I mean is that there are values besides liberty that libertarians need to stress because the implementation of liberty depends in large part on the understanding and/or promotion of those other values. For what I mean, see Charles Johnson's discussion of the different kinds of "thick libertarianism," here: charleswjohnson.name
>
> But it sounds to me as though the LRC is suggesting trading liberty off AGAINST these other values, which is another matter altogether.

In short, we need a big tent of the radicals whose values are not served by the corporate center that controls both parties. Along with such radicals we might attract those who are predisposed to radicalism, if only they could be reached: those with a vague sense that they're treading water and getting ripped off because the parasites are in charge and nobody is addressing the issue. Such radicals and radical-sympathizers currently ill at ease within the major parties might, if the truth be known, amount to a majority of the electorate. We need gun rights people, homeschoolers, and free jury activists; *and* we need appropriate/human-scale technology people, organic farmers, and radical industrial unionists. Above all, we need to make them see that they're really on the same side, and that their common enemy is the respective party establishments that currently claim to represent them.

The platform adopted under the influence of Milsted's group, on the other hand, abandons many of the issues that would pull these dissatisfied people from the two big parties. For example, issues of civil liberty, the PATRIOT act and Homeland Security have the potential of uniting the Barr wing of the GOP and the Wellstone-Feingold wing of the Democrats with the LP. Nader made a valiant effort in 2004 at getting Greens to appeal to the kinds of genuine small-government conservatives who were alienated by the Bush junta.