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Selling the Store?

Kevin Carson

April 11, 2005

Interesting exchange on libertarian outreach strategy between Brad Spangler and Thomas L. Knapp.

Commenting on the formation of the Libertarian Reform Caucus, Brad writes,

...it is perhaps no surprise that Libertarians have collectively failed to recognize one of the most important things they can control to improve the situation...

Recognizing that a political party makes a damned poor educational organization and vice versa.

Call me Mr. Obvious, but does anybody think that maybe part of the reason that the Libertarian Party (an ideologically oriented political party) is not more successful might be that conscious public allegiance to libertarian ideology isn't more widespread? It takes serious, hard educational efforts to produce something like that — and a political party isn't necessarily the best tool to achieve it.

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The Libertarian Party will start kicking more butt when we've got — gasp! — a whole buttload of libertarians (and not before).

That doesn't seem like a difficult point to grasp. Yet Libertarians are perpetually exhausted from trying to run a political party on a skeleton crew. That's not an effective way to build a Libertarian majority. The situation calls for activists educating themselves more thoroughly and then going out and educating a lot more people — even if it means they have to let the party not be the focus of their libertarian activism for awhile.

Tom responds:

[Brad] thinks that what's needed is not a “softening” of approach, but rather a concentration on creating more people who like the party's ideology.

What's missing here?...

Both the LRC and Brad seem to think that the party is the product. It isn't. It's the store.

The platform isn't the product, either. It's the store's mission statement...

The party is the store. The products on the shelves are candidates, policy proposals and such.

You don't sell the store. You sell the products.

You don't sell the store's mission statement. You sell the store's products...

One of the basics of sales doctrine is that you sell benefits, not features...

Any approach that focuses on:

a) selling ideology (feature) instead of policy outcomes (benefits); and

b) selling the party (store) instead of its candidates and policies (products)

... is doomed to fail...

I tend to agree with Tom that priority should be given to pointing out the benefits of libertarian policy, from the standpoint of the general public's existing interests and concerns. In the case of libertarianism, any educational effort aimed at getting people to prefer libertarian principles (e.g., and especially, non-aggression) for their own sake will likely be both very long-term and uphill. On the other hand, an educational effort aimed at reaching people where they are now, and selling libertarian policies in terms of the things they currently value, could be quite effective.

But there's a fine line between marketing and education. Consider:

As I understand it, Tom's sales strategy involves 1) pointing out to the public, in some area of policy, how the existing evils they object to, what they see as pressing concerns, are a direct result of the state's policies; and 2) pointing out how a free market order would reduce those evils.

In each case, the libertarian argument shows that the forms of government intervention which the court intellectuals sell as limits on the power of big business, were actually started at the behest of big business. In each area of policy, the regulatory-welfare state is shown to be a system of government intervention on behalf of the rich and powerful; and all the assorted evils they object to in our society are shown to be its side-effects. Pollution is a result of subsidies to polluting corporations and legal protections against internalizing pollution costs; sprawl results from subsidies to outlying real estate developments (and to politically connected real estate developers); outsourcing from subsidies to the export of

capital; the energy shortage from subsidies to transportation and energy consumption; etc., etc.

Such case-by-case argumentation could well have, cumulatively, an educational side-effect (for many, at least). Point out enough individual cases showing that a policy (which the public has been taught from grade school to view as an enlightened, idealistic, and “common sense” measure) actually benefits the rich and powerful at the expense of everybody else, and some people may take the next step of inductive reasoning: making the generalized observation that benefiting the privileged rich and powerful at everybody else’s expense is what government does.

It doesn’t necessarily mean that such a libertarian outreach program will lead to a majority of people adopting the non-aggression principle and becoming libertarian ideologues. It is likewise unlikely to lead many people to adopt, as an article of faith, that government is *always* the “political means,” or a “zero-sum game,” or any other catchphrase you prefer. It might, however, lead many more people than at present to accept, on the basis of experience, that this is often (or even usually) what government does. It might lead to an increased skepticism of the good intentions of the “progressive” state, and a willingness to look for the man behind the curtain when they hear “progressive” rhetoric.

In short, each specific libertarian policy proposal should carry with it a little lesson in what government really does, and who it really serves. Enough such little lessons, cumulatively and perhaps subliminally, might lead to a *big* lesson.