

THE POWER OF THE INDIVIDUAL

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At first blush, last fall's elections sounded a warning to conservatives everywhere. Could the breadth and depth of the Democratic sweep be an early sign of the demise of conservatism? The answer is no, but the election should be a Revere-like wake up call to conservatives. Mainstream conservative thinking has become partisan and political. Ironically, in the process of de-emphasizing the social and economic underpinnings upon which conservatism was founded, the movement has become less of a factor at the ballot box.

Analysis of the fall election returns shows the results to be partly the result of the ebb and flow of partisan politics and partly due to a widespread lack of confidence in the President. Regardless, the November election threw a scare into conservatives that has yielded a timely reflection on the state of conservatism in America. This collection of essays in *Wisconsin Interest* is one such introspective. While a consensus has yet to emerge, there is a growing sense that the conservative movement has indeed strayed from the principles that have served the country well. Most troubling is that conservative principles are difficult to



find in government today. Those principles have been eaten away by decades of compromise and accommodation.

For an example of what is wrong with government, we need look no further than the budget Governor Doyle sent to the Legislature in January. The centerpiece of his health care initiative was a new tax on Wisconsin hospitals.

In arguing for the new tax, the Governor maintained that the additional tax would allow Wisconsin to generate more federal money (our money) which would be sent back to the hospitals to lower costs. If any of this makes sense to you, then you must be living in the parallel universe that is contemporary government. This hospital tax captures much of what ails today's government. It is a government in which the gears turn in a world completely detached from reality. It is a government that never touches real human lives. It is a government demanding ever-increasing quantities of money to keep the machinery operating. We are right to question any assertion that this new hospital tax will somehow improve the human condition.

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Only in government could such an argument resonate.

Another sad example of the failure of our government can be found inside the classrooms of our Milwaukee Public Schools. It is there that we see how learning has been devalued. It is also there that we see that the vast educational machinery of government has failed to recognize, acknowledge, and adapt to the changing circumstances. It is a government that has grown far too comfortable sending generations of urban children into the world unable to shed themselves of the millstone of disadvantage that is their birthright.

It would be easy to pass both of these off as symptoms of the rise of liberal thinking and either the acquiescence or decline of conservatism. That might be a reasonable conclusion if each is viewed in isolation. However, let's pull back and view the state of the world through the prism of classic conservative thinkers, those people who laid the foundation for conservative thinking shortly after World War II. (Many modern day conservatives are surprised to discover that Friedrich Hayek thought of himself as a liberal, applying the 19th century interpretation.) To Hayek, Friedman and others, conservatism was an economic and social model based on *individualism* as contrasted with *collectivism*. Those who espouse individualism thrive on competition, they understand that many of their initiatives will fail and they are willing to take the risk. They are willing to stand or fall on their own ideas and want nothing more than the latitude to see those ideas through to either success or failure. Capitalism, entrepreneurship and, in the sphere of public policy, school choice, all feel comfortable to those dedicated to individualism.

By contrast, those who champion collectivism want all boats to rise together. Through generations of public education, they have learned of the goodness of government. They see how government saved families and the nation from the ravages of the Great Depression. They ignore the failings of government in education, health care, environmental preservation, etc. Collectivists, in their desire

to see all boats rising together, fail to understand that each boat is in its own pool. The only way for the collective to rise is for the individuals to rise. They refuse to acknowledge that the success of the collective is dependent on the success of individuals.

From individualism, as articulated by Hayek and Friedman, flow the underpinnings of an approach to government and governing. Yet the smaller government they envisioned, one that is intent on furthering the capacity of individuals, is gone. In its place stands a monolith where, according to Friedman, "people effectively have no voice." The logical outlet then has been the ballot box. Elections and electioneering have taken on unnatural proportions.

In today's partisan version of conservatism, the edges have been rounded off Hayek's vision. The individual versus the collective has been pushed into the background. Conservatives have busied themselves with shaping, shaving and constraining government, while the ship of government is sailing on a steady path toward collectivism. They have agreed to play on the wrong field.

Two examples of familiar government programs will highlight this phenomenon. Example one: State government is obsessed with economic development. Programs have been created—152 within Wisconsin state government—and tax policy has been contorted, all in an attempt to have government jumpstart economic development and create jobs. By definition, government economic development is all about central planning. Yet economic development has little to do with government. It is about individuals taking advantage of their ideas and their guile to better themselves and to create wealth. That is a concept beyond the pale for government rules and funding. Rather than questioning the very need for government's involvement in economic development, we hear conservative calls for better coordination and more effective programming of funding.

Example two: Nowhere does the blood of the collectivist run hotter than on the topic of

energy conservation. They have succeeded in artificially and arbitrarily raising energy costs through taxes and fees, some of which are plowed back into government programs to encourage or shame us into using compact fluorescent light bulbs and driving smaller vehicles. What they do not realize is that individuals will change their behavior when economic facts suggest conservation is warranted. They also don't understand that any change that individuals impose on themselves will be a lasting, penetrating change, the kind of change collectivists can only dream about. Solar power, long the darling of the collectivists, has only recently gained a toehold due to the investment by private investors. It has become a wise business investment.

Any discussion of conservatism inevitably and rightfully includes President Reagan. Reagan was able to strike a nerve with both the left and the right owing to the consistency of his message, a message centered on the potential of the individual. Be it the scope of government, the complexity of the tax code or the enslavement of people behind the iron curtain, Reagan was a champion of the individual. He rose above the class warfare that collectivists use to bait conservatives and remained true to his principles. From Gorbachev to Tip O'Neill to the air traffic controllers, all came to understand the strength of a leader committed to his principles.

Today's brand of political conservatism is more partisan and not as rooted in championing the individual. It is a conservatism that does not so inspire the inner greatness in all of us as much as it keeps score. We tell ourselves that by focusing on the accumulation of legislative seats we will maximize our influence in shaping government programs. However, is beating the other side and accumulating legislative seats enough? Will it engender long-term allegiance? Probably not. Part of the problem is that conservatism today is lacking that icon at the top of the movement who can articulate principles in a way that speaks to the inner greatness in all of us. We need someone

to remind us why we are the freest nation with the greatest economy in the history of the world.

The future success of conservatism requires a return to the focus on the individual. Yes, lower taxes and smaller government is part of the formula, but it cannot stop there. To be successful, the conservative movement must resonate with a wide swath of America. It must be relevant to the "Crunchy Cons" who believe that a moral culture is more important than politics. It must also be as relevant to the inner city dwellers as it is to those of us living in rural and suburban America.

Partisans would have us believe that the inner city is not likely to be a breeding ground for future conservatives. In fact, residents of our inner cities have the most to gain from a focus on individualism. They have the richest understanding of the failings of government. While the defining governmental moment for most of us comes once a year on April 15, for the underclass the defining moment occurs every day. Each can describe their personal experience with failing schools, lethargic social service agencies, and inaccessible health care. They see that, in spite of the energy government has devoted to raising all of the boats, they have been left behind. Conservative principles, built around the value of the individual, represent the only sure way of improving the future for the underclass.

It is not the intent of those who advocate bigger government and more public spending to impede the progress, but that has been the effect. It is the ultimate irony that we have to convince ourselves of this simple truth while other nations are working to emulate the American experience. As we build ever-increasing governments, the old collectivists—China, Thailand, Vietnam among them—are throwing in the towel and turning their backs on collectivism. They have witnessed the power of the individual and are implementing land rights, upgrading their banking acumen, and wrestling with how to control their superheated economies.

They have come to understand the power of individualism and are doing everything they can to catch up to us both economically and philosophically. We cannot afford to allow our preoccupation with partisanship to take our eye off the ball. What we all value and

what has made us great is a devotion to allowing each of us to reach our full potential. That is what the founders of the nation intended, and that is what we must expect from our elected officials and our government.