



## D.C. Needs a Grass Roots Fix

Citizens on the left and right agree that the government is in dire need of reform. So why are the political parties, including the Tea Party, so little help when it comes to working for legitimate reform?

Walking across New Hampshire last month, recruiting citizens in the “Live Free” state to the cause of fundamental reform—a 185 mile walk that we just finished, with about a hundred crossing the finishing line: read more here—I met a man who told me he was a “conservative Republican,” which, as he explained is “spelled ‘T E A P A R T Y.’” “What’s the chance,” he asked me, “of getting one of us to take this issue on? What Tea Party candidates are with you?”

His question reminded me of just how different New Hampshire is—at least from the world within the beltway of D.C. Because within New Hampshire, there are plenty from the right who look at the “system of corruption in Washington,” as John McCain described it in 1999, and are open to the sort of fundamental reform that would actually fix it. Andrew Hemingway, a young leader of the Tea Party in New Hampshire, and the likely Republican nominee for governor, marched with us on the walk. So too did Republican Jim Rubens, a former state senator now in the Republican primary for the United States Senate. These Republicans are not afraid to talk about real reforms that would actually address this “corruption.” They agree Washington is broken, and they are serious about finding a way to fix it.

But when you look to the standard bearers of the Tea Party Right—even those who, as the Daily Kos described, are “strategically adopting positions to triangulate ... left and right flank[s]” (read: Rand Paul)—the substance of their reforms is pretty weak tea. Though they insist (and they are right) that “crony capitalism” is corrupting both government and capitalism, their remedies seem more designed to avoid offending the large funders of Republican campaigns than to actually changing anything fundamental. I get how “repeal(ing) the 17th Amendment!” sounds really tough. I don’t get how it does anything to solve the corruption that is Washington. And as far as I’ve seen, none within the cabal has yet to explain just how their dream—of a smaller government, not infected with the cronyism that now reigns—gets built so long as congressman profit from a larger, and more invasive government (just ask Peter Schweitzer: more targets for “extortion”), and so long as “corporate welfare,” as the Cato Institute reminds us, is the easiest way for congressmen to recruit loyal funders.

But if you take a step outside of D.C.’s beltway, you can begin to find thinkers from the libertarian right who are talking about the sort of reform that would radically change the way Washington “works,” so to speak. And more intriguingly, people who talk about it in away that suggests a platform that could genuinely unite Right and Left.

Take David Stockman—the former Republican congressman from Michigan, and Ronald Reagan’s budget director (until a “friend” betrayed his confidences and Stockman’s true views

about the Reagan administration became public). At an event at Harvard last fall, Stockman spoke about his latest book, *The Great Deformation*, a work practically architected to be hated by everyone. There are no heroes in Stockman's book—or at least none that any ordinary American is likely to recall. Keynes was wrong, Friedman was wrong, Reagan was wrong, Obama is wrong, Larry Summers is the devil, and both FDR and the Reagan supply-siders were frauds. Even Stockman gets attacked in Stockman's book. The book is depressing on steroids. The meme is the inverse of Harvey Milk: you gotta take away *all their hope*.

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Yet at a workshop after his talk, we pressed Stockman to craft a Left/Right platform—one that didn't pretend to be comprehensive (no one thinks true believers on the Right and Left believe the same things), but one that might still mobilize a political movement that would fundamentally reorient American politics, and offer some real hope for reform.

The resulting five planks were pretty interesting.

1. *For Peace*: "Empire America," as Stockman calls it, must end. No longer can we serve as the world's policeman. And to staunch our Superman urges, we must radically reduce our military budget so that any urge to intervene takes affirmative action by Congress.

2. *For Compassion*: The government's number one job, Stockman believes, is an "appropriate defense." Number two is to care for those who can't care for themselves. Yet only a tiny fraction of the transfer payments within our government today actually benefit the poor or needy. Whether or not we can afford entitlements for the middle-class or rich, in Stockman's view, we must at least guarantee proper support for those who need our help.

3. *For Liberty*: Both the Big Brother and Nanny State must go. Prohibition (aka, the "war on drugs") is an illiberal failure. We should declare peace, and call our troops home. And the perpetual surveillance of us by our government is not the America of our Founders. If the police want to invade our privacy, let them get a warrant.

4. *Against Corruption—of the Democracy*: Congress, Stockman believes, is a failed state. The economy of campaign fundraising has driven the institution to the brink of collapse. Nothing serious will get done so long as this system survives. And no reform, whether from the Left or Right, will get passed so long as the number one job of members is raising money from the especially interested to get reelected. The only way to fix this corruption is to radically change the economy of fundraising. Stockman therefore supports full and exclusive public funding of public elections, term limits and the end to any revolving door to K St.

5. *Against Corruption—of the Economy*: Our government has been seduced (this former Wall Street executive tells us) by the Wall Street economy. It needs to refocus on the Main Street economy. Government policy systematically tilts towards Wall Street growth. In the process, it tilts against Main Street growth. Stockman would enact a super-Glass-Steagall, separating banks from investment banks, and breaking up the big banks. He would level the taxes between capital

and labor (no more special capital gains tax), and put an end to the “Greenspan put”. (Suffice it: Wall Street wouldn’t like the policies of its former executive.)

There’s lots to quibble with here, and some that’s probably too obscure. It takes real work to understand plank five, and most liberals or progressives will be against it (though not me). And I’m as anti-corruption as anyone, but I don’t think we need to eliminate all private funding of elections (small contributions—\$100 or less) are fine and valuable, though we do need a form of bottom up public funding—such as Congressman Sarbanes’s Government By the People Act). Finally, I don’t think single terms make sense. California tried term limits; the result is that it’s the lobbyists who know best how to get things done.

But what is striking is just how much there is to agree upon, and yet how little of this agreement is even utterable by lame-stream politicians (to remix that slogan just a bit). Exactly why is it that 25 years after the end of the Cold War, our defense budget is larger (PDF) than it was then? Even if Social Security should be expanded (a view the Left holds but not the Stockman Right), why isn’t our first priority to make sure the poor and the helpless have the support that any decent society would give? Who really is for the NSA-state? Or the war on drugs? Whatever a “financialized economy” means, is there any non-campaign-fundraising-related reason why Democrats and Republicans continue to fall over themselves to keep Wall Street happy? And with 96 percent of Americans believing it “important” to “reduce the influence of money in politics,” why is this even a question to debate?

The striking fact about American politics today is the gap between America and its politics. If this were a market, entrepreneurs would quickly fill that gap. If this were a democracy, a new generation of leaders would claim it.

We’ll soon see just what we are—and who the real “reformers” are.