



Everything Michigan

Column: The role of wealth and Kochs in designing the government of the future

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By **Joyce Pines | Kalamazoo Gazette**



We'd Like To Buy The World For Koch

We'd like to buy the world for Koch
And give the middle class a shove
Squash unions' mights and workers' rights
And fund Wisconsin's gov.

We'd like to fool the world to sing
The selfish schemes of big industries
We'd like to buy the world for Koch
And keep it run by companies
That's the far right-wing.

What the GOP wants today
Koch Brothers
Is the far right-wing.



It's supposed to be a government of, by and for the people, but is it really? What happens when Charles and David Koch and some of their like-minded wealthy friends bankroll think tanks all over the country to drive public policy in a direction favorable to their interests and concerns?

In 1977, the Koch brothers provided the funds to launch the Cato Institute, the nation's first libertarian think-tank, according to Jane Mayer, in **The New Yorker** piece last year that catapulted the brothers into the spotlight.

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As an example of how this works, The Cato Institute has been particularly prolific in attempting to debunk global warming. And, of course, the Koch brothers are in the fossil fuel business, which many believe contributes to global warming. The brothers have also given money to The Heritage Foundation, another conservative think tank, also among the global warming doubters.

Now, the purpose of this column is not to rehash the global warming debate. It's to note the following: If you are in the business of extracting and making money from fossil fuels and scientists begin to say that your business may be contributing to climate change, what would you do? Privately funding think tanks to debunk the whole notion of a global warming problem is a pretty clever maneuver.

And it appears to work, as any effort in the United States to advance the idea of global warming as something that is actually happening is going nowhere in Congress. Our own U.S. Rep. Fred Upton, now in charge of the Energy Committee, supported his committee's three votes this month against amendments recognizing that climate change is real, despite the broad scientific consensus that "climate change is happening and human beings are a major reason for it." His committee voted unanimously in favor of the

Upton-Inhofe bill to repeal the EPA's scientific endangerment finding on greenhouse pollution, according to a **posting on Think Progress**. The story also reports that the Kochs contributed an average of \$10,000 to each of the committee members.



Charles and David Koch

In **The Weekly Standard**, the Kochs finally get to tell their side of the story. In "The Paranoid Style in Liberal Politics, Matthew Continetti **writes**:

"For progressives confused at the heated opposition to their do-gooder agenda, the Kochs became convenient scapegoats. Invoking their name was a way to write off opposition to Obama as the false consciousness of racist rubes stoked by greedy businessmen. In the liberal imagination the Kochs ascended from obscurity to infamy in record time. Starting in the spring of 2009, whenever you

turned on MSNBC or clicked on the *Huffington Post* you'd see the Kochs described in terms more applicable to Lex Luthor and General Zod."

Politico notes that Continetti, an opinion writer for The Weekly Standard, is the recipient of a fellowship from a foundation to which the Charles G. Koch Foundation has given \$165,000 since 2002. For an interesting exercise, read both the Continetti and Mayer stories on the Kochs. Then ask yourself which one uses an excess of hyperbole.

So, what's all this mean to Michigan? How about if the Kochs and other wealthy business folks, such as Michigan's DeVos and Prince families, back other think tanks, like say The Mackinac Center for Public Policy? And then the think tank cranks out report after report and paper after paper advocating all kinds of government reforms.

For example, Mother Jones magazine, **in a story by Andy Kroll**, reports:

"In 2005, the **Mackinac Center for Public Policy** had urged reforms to Michigan law giving more power and protection to emergency financial managers, state-appointed officials who parachute into ailing cities or school districts and employ drastic measures to fix budgets on the brink of collapse. In January, the free-market-loving center published four recommendations, including granting emergency managers the power to override elected officials (such as a mayor or school board member) and toss out union contracts. All four ended up in (Gov. Rick) Snyder's legislation."

Is Gov. Rick Snyder dipping into a network of very wealthy folks who plow funds into think tanks which turn out policy papers and research to back their goals of derailing regulation, cutting taxes and generally weakening government?

Is there anything wrong with this? No.

University of Wisconsin professor William Cronon offers a detailed explanation of how this works on his **scholar as citizen blog**. In it, he discusses the American Legislative Exchange Council. It's **website**, Cronon blog.mlive.com/.../print.html?entry=/2...

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writes, "claims that in each legislative cycle, its members introduce 1,000 pieces of legislation based on its work, and claims that roughly 18 percent of these bills are enacted into law. (Among them was the controversial 2010 anti-immigrant law in Arizona.)

But this is the part that gets my attention. Cronon is writing here about the recent situation in Wisconsin, but it could apply to other states and Washington, D.C., as well:

"If it has seemed to you while watching recent debates in the Legislature that many Republican members of the Senate and Assembly have already made up their minds about the bills on which they're voting, and don't have much interest in listening to arguments being made by anyone else in the room, it's probably because they did in fact make up their minds about these bills long before they entered the Capitol chambers."

Does that sound like democracy?

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