

Sun Journal

Experience and theory. And lack thereof

Bob Neal

April 29, 2018

Time was, we were taught not to discuss two topics in polite company. Religion and politics.

The thinking of our parents and grandparents was that everyone had a different take on religion and politics, that these ideas underpinned how folks thought and behaved. So polite people didn't risk angering others by tiptoeing into convictions that might differ from their own. My, how things have changed.

I used to have breakfast each week with the state representative for my district. We were cordial as we disagreed and agreed on the issues. As the election of 2016 drew near, he wondered whether it would be a transformative election like those of 1932 and 1980. Those transformations were rooted in ideas from outside the mainstream of the day. 1932 ushered in the New Deal, a sharp turn from hands-off government. 1980 was the first retreat from those ideas as government began to reduce its role in our daily lives.

In that time, the source of ideas has swung around from left to right and now to who knows where? If anywhere.

My mother, reared in Danvers, Mass., when New England was rock-ribbed Republican, liked to put down those Democrats she called "parlor pinks" or "limousine liberals." She thought them all theory and no experience of the day-to-day "lives of quiet desperation" that Henry David Thoreau wrote most folks live.

Certainly, the parlor pinks, sitting in their parlors reading *The Daily Worker* or boning up on Karl Marx, did not live lives of quiet desperation.

Advertisement

Today, it may be the right wing that is theoretical rather than practical. That shift came to me in two doses. George Will, a conservative columnist for the *Washington Post*, post-mortemed that Ronald Reagan had won the 1980 election because he offered voters ideas while Democrats offered the same-old same-old. Even if voters didn't particularly like Reagan's ideas, they recognized that there was thought behind them.

The second shot came about seven years later, when I was editorial page editor of the *Waterville Sentinel*. Our local political columnist argued the conservative line quite well. As a nascent business owner — I kept newspapering as I launched my farm — I often told him of my encounters with federal and state bureaucrats. I figured he would understand, almost intuitively,

what life was like for the owner of a small business in Maine. He was a conservative, after all, and would have practical knowledge of the practical world.

He hadn't a clue. I'd spun a yarn about something numb an inspector had said or done, and the columnist replied with a line from the conservative economist Friedrich Hayek that had nothing to do with what I had said. He was all theory, no practical experience.

Gradually, the thinking of conservative politics has turned from daily experience with what they saw as an overbearing bureaucracy that was way too eager to tell us how to conduct our lives to parsing the sentences of Austrian economists and the Cato Institute.

Here's an example from Maine. We had a full-blown argument during a referendum in 2016 over raising the minimum wage. Would a higher minimum wage force employers to let some workers go? Or would it put workers closer to being able to live on their pay?

Neither side was completely correct. Surprise. You might have thought the don't-raise-the-minimum-wage folks would cite all sorts of disasters that had hit Seattle (minimum wage raised to \$15 an hour) and San Francisco (\$14 an hour). Instead, they hammered away with doctrines steeped in libertarian economics. Or, as the author Willie Clement put it, that cowboy was all hat and no horse.

Advertisement

Meanwhile, the raise-high-the-minimum-wage-boys guy cited at least a bit of evidence that total employment did not go down when minimums went up in Seattle and San Fran.

And, academic studies made after Maine's referendum in 2016 suggest that higher minimum wages in Seattle meant eliminating jobs that paid in the range between the old wage and the new. But those losses were almost perfectly offset by the creation of jobs above the new minimum wage. So, more or less a wash.

But those who would roll back the voter-approved minimum wage in Maine seem unaware of the Seattle study. That is the practical experience of day-to-day life.

The shift may be complete from practical to theoretical conservatives and from theoretical to practical liberals. With a twist. With the election of 2016, we may have moved from not talking about politics and religion with folks who disagree with us to not talking politics and religion with folks who mostly agree with us.

When I suggested to my sister in Wisconsin that she must be happy that Speaker of the House Paul Ryan was leaving politics, I could hear her seethe at the other end of the line. "Don't even bring him up." Ryan is from southeastern Wisconsin, while my sister lives in northwestern Wisconsin. There the similarity ends, and she didn't want to hear his name, even to wave bye-bye as he leaves political life. She and I agree that Ryan is a moral coward who kowtowed to Donald Trump, to the detriment of his Republican Party and of America. But the mere mention of his name set her anger juices aboil.

I already knew better than to bring up Trump to my sister. We agree he is an existential threat to the United States, but we don't talk about it because we don't want to boil each other's blood. I won't even bring up how she feels about religion.