

The Gazette

The political establishment needs to listen to libertarians

By: Barry Fagin, *Senior Fellow at the Independence Institute in Denver and a recipient of the National ACLU Civil Liberties Award* – August 1, 2013

It's been a good week for libertarians. For those who don't know, a libertarian is someone who takes a consistent, constitutionally restrained view of government. Libertarians favor lower taxes, lower spending, and resist interfering in economic transactions between consenting adults. On economic issues, they align with conservatives.

Unlike conservatives, however, libertarians favor lower spending on the military, with savings obtained through a less interventionist foreign policy. And unlike conservatives, libertarians are reluctant to interfere in the personal activities of consenting adults. On social issues like gay rights and civil liberties, they are more liberal.

It's been a good news week for us, and I think for America. Just last week the New York Times used the term "libertarian Republican" to describe Sen. Rand Paul (KY), which means the Paper of Record believes their average reader knows what that means. Pretty cool.

Gov. Chris Christie, the Republican establishment heavyweight, recently railed against "the strain of libertarianism going through both parties." The Washington Post picked up on that, running an online piece headlined "Libertarianism and the coming Republican political war".

What did Christie mean by "both parties"? Another libertarian Republican, Justin Amash (MI), is leading the charge to repeal the NSA's warrantless surveillance program. Bipartisan support comes from Amash's Michigan colleague John Conyers, one of the few Democrats in Congress who can call himself a true civil libertarian.

But it's not just the right that is panicking. The neoliberal magazine New Republic is in a tizzy about the libertarian direction of the Supreme Court. They worry that the Cato Institute, the nation's leading libertarian think tank, filed amicus briefs in 19 Supreme Court cases, and wound up on the winning side in 15 of them. Darn tootin'.

What is the establishment so worried about? Christie talked about "widows and orphans," while the New Republic warned about the possible erosion of environmental protection and safety regulations. But 90 percent of what the federal government does has nothing to do with helping the truly impoverished, or public health and safety, or anything else our critics claim to be so scared of losing.

This election cycle, could we talk about ending corporate welfare? Closing overseas bases and bringing the troops home? Entitlement reform? Real tax cuts? Real spending cuts? Abolishing the IRS, the Department of Education, and the Department of Agriculture? School choice?

Can we have a rational discussion how drug prohibition subsidizes organized crime? About what it will take to help the American underclass? Can we encourage more immigration while ending illegals' access to welfare benefits? Can we talk about how today's youth won't live better than their parents, and how to fix that?

Can we openly admit the failures of the redistributive state, and propose what might come next? Can we look at how government actually works in practice, as opposed to a civics textbook? Can we treat homosexual Americans just like everybody else? Can we ask what rights Americans have, and how governments are instituted to protect them?

Apparently not. To hear our critics tell it, if the libertarian tide is not checked America's rivers will run black with pollution, people will be fornicating naked in the streets, and America will become overrun with poverty and despair. I don't think that's correct.

Would it really be so bad to move the country in a more libertarian direction? Right now, civil society is upside down. The federal government has the most money and power, states have less, cities are going bankrupt, and local approaches to policy problems are laughed out of contemporary political discourse. Isn't that the opposite of how things should be?

Libertarians offer a historically informed, principled, constitutional vision of how America could be better. It's time for libertarian conservatives, libertarian liberals, libertarian Republicans, libertarian Democrats, and libertarian independents to responsibly articulate why we think we're right.

In return, the political establishment needs to stop foaming at the mouth and start listening.