



Ralph Nader, right-wing darling? Strange bedfellows in America's cranky politics

By: Alexander Panetta

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WASHINGTON - These days in Washington, it's become fashionable for conservatives to rage against the corporate machine. In their unlikely midst is a progressive firebrand who's been raging at it for decades.

Yes, Ralph Nader is now playing to right-wing audiences.

The longtime consumer advocate and perennial presidential candidate best known for splitting the anti-Bush vote in 2000 has been cuddling with uncommon bedfellows these days as he pitches his new book, "Unstoppable: The Emerging Left-Right Alliance To Dismantle The Corporate State."

His basic theme is that the fringes of the progressive left and limited-government right should hit the pause button on their endless battles to work together against a common foe: an American political establishment ostensibly controlled by big business interests.

He describes an ecosystem of Washington politicians, thousands of company lobbyists, and business types who donate to political parties with one hand and expect regulatory favours back from government in the other.

Nader calls them corporatists. Others employ less flattering terms — like crony capitalists and corporate welfare bums.

Whatever the name, the 80-year-old says American voters are ready to take them on. In order to force big changes in American politics, though, Nader says the anti-establishment right-wingers in the Tea Party and anti-establishment lefties from Occupy Wall Street have to work together.

His book lists 25 possible areas of common ground. Some might be a tough sell to American conservatives, like his desire for an indexed minimum wage. But he has some allies across the aisle when he calls for reducing corporate subsidies, annual audits of defence contracts, an end to the war on drugs, and restrictions on the surveillance state.

Nader's call for unity is endorsed on the book jacket by prominent anti-tax crusader Grover Norquist. Nader also sat down recently for a friendly interview with Ron Paul, the libertarian ex-presidential candidate and father to possible 2016 candidate Rand Paul. And there he was last Friday, headlining an event at the Cato Institute, founded by the deep-pocketed Tea Party backers, the Koch brothers.

The event began with one of the hosts addressing an elephant in the room.

"Yeah, you heard it right: Ralph Nader is speaking at the Cato Institute. That little popping sound you hear is heads exploding all over Washington," said Cato vice-president Brink Lindsey in introducing his guest speaker.

"(It's) that same sound you hear when people discover for the first time that the Koch brothers oppose the drug war and support drug legalization. Because when you look at politics through ideological spectacles and see everything in terms of left versus right, a lot of the most interesting things become invisible."

Libertarian writer Timothy Carney told the same audience that U.S. conservatives are finally awake to the idea that supporting big business doesn't equal supporting the free market. He said that realization was sparked, for many, by the massive post-2008 government bailouts of the banking and auto sector: "It took Obama for them to realize it," he said of his conservative allies.

The backdrop behind this Nader book tour is a battle in Congress over corporate subsidies. There's currently a push to cancel funding for the national Export-Import Bank, which provides loan guarantees and credits for corporate exports.

The liberal left is not leading this fight.

It's House Republicans forcing the issue. And not the party leadership, but the Tea Party contingent. One member of that insurrectionist wing laid out his objectives in a recent speech titled, "The Main Street Economy vs. The Washington Crony Economy."

Raised on a farm, Texas lawmaker Jeb Hensarling nonetheless blasted farm subsidies. He also blasted alternative-energy subsidies, and a tax code that favours certain businesses — including the NFL and other pro sports.

It doesn't matter that the Export-Import Bank can't run deficits, and hardly represents a trickle in the multitrillion-dollar U.S. federal bacon-hose. Hensarling called the fight symbolically important.

"I do not know of a better poster-child for the Washington insider economy and corporate welfare than the Export-Import Bank," he said in a speech to the right-wing Heritage Foundation.

"Its demise would clearly be one of the few achievable victories for the Main Street competitive economy left in this Congress. I believe it is a defining issue for our party, and a defining issue for our movement. The re-authorization debate really goes to the heart of the question: Which economy do we believe in?"

The insurgency of conservative free-marketers against big-business cronyism is making more noise in the U.S. than in Canada. But neither country is immune to governments picking winners and losers:

— The aerospace sector is a leading recipient of grants in both countries. In the U.S., Delta is raising its voice against Ex-Im Bank subsidies for foreign airlines to buy Boeing planes because the money helps its competitors.

— On farm subsidies, government support has actually gone down in both countries. Neither is among the top tier of OECD heaviest-subsidy nations, although the U.S. hands out more as a percentage of GDP.

Nader's initiative drew kind words from Ron Paul.

On his broadcast, the retired congressman expressed a similar attitude to the drug war, corporate welfare, military spending, government snooping and handouts to corporations.

"When I first went to Washington I thought welfare was only for a few people getting food stamps," the longtime congressman said.

"I found out that those are the crumbs. And the big stuff goes to big corporations, the military-industrial complex and the whole works. If you want regulations to protect the consumer the banks get to write the regulations!"

Nader conceded that the left and right will always disagree on numerous issues.

For instance, the differences over gun control and the size of the social safety net have existed for generations and, he said, those disagreements aren't going away.

But, he asked: why let everything be defined by those issues? Why not rally around some common frustrations?

"What I'm saying in this book is we disagree on issues A, B and C," Nader said in the Paul interview.

"But we agree on W, X, Y and Z issues. And L, M, N, O, P... We can turn this country around, once we get together. Because it is, really, politically unstoppable."

