



Sometimes We Can Just All Get Along

By Suzanne Bates

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It was clear that Brink Lindsey, vice president of research at Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, was surprised to find himself on the same panel as the well-known progressive activist Ralph Nader.

Lindsey said that as a young man he considered Nader — a Connecticut resident who was made famous by his many runs for president, as well as his consumer advocacy — one of “Satan’s henchman.”

“Yeah, you hear that right, Ralph Nader is speaking at the Cato Institute,” said Lindsey. “That little popping sound you hear is heads exploding all over Washington.”

Nader was at Cato to discuss his new book, *Unstoppable: The Emerging Left-Right Alliance to Dismantle the Corporate State*. The goal of the book is to convince those on the populist right and those on the populist left that they should form an “alliance of outsiders” to take down the powers that be.

There are some very obvious and clear differences — the libertarian/tea party movement on the right grew primarily out of a deep distrust of big government, while the populist movement on the left grew primarily out of a deep distrust of big business.

But the common word here is “big,” and by using that word both the left and right imply that anything too big and too powerful can be threatening to individual liberty — whether a massive nanny state, or a bank that’s “too big to fail.”

In this season of political bickering, it is nice to take a step back and remember there are many areas where the left and right can and do find common ground. For example:

***Crony Capitalism** — Nader spoke at Cato about crony capitalism — also known as corporate welfare. He pointed out the difference between big businesses, which, when they struggle, turn to Washington for bailouts; small businesses, by contrast, just go bankrupt.

We've seen our state in recent years spend millions of dollars, ostensibly to persuade billion-dollar hedge funds to stay in the state, and millions more to bring new businesses to the state.

Connecticut would be better off not picking winners by giving handouts to big corporations, but rather the state should offer a more streamlined tax and regulatory system that would benefit all businesses.

***Criminal Justice** — As we all face the failure of the massively expensive war on drugs, conservative groups like Right On Crime, a national initiative led by the Texas Public Policy Center, are making the case from the right that our criminal justice system needs to be reformed.

Connecticut implemented some important reforms in 2003 by strengthening the state's parole system and focusing on reducing recidivism. This is not to be confused with the state's recent early release reforms, which allow offenders early release if they meet specific criteria over the course of their incarceration. Critics say the program has allowed violent offenders back on the street before serving their full prison sentences. This is the wrong way to go about reform, which should first and foremost focus on public safety.

The left-right consensus instead is on the recognition that keeping young non-violent offenders, usually those who've been incarcerated for drug crimes, behind bars is expensive and harmful. Those put behind bars — who are usually young black or Latino men — get caught up in the criminal justice system and have a hard time ever getting out. Jailing these men is damaging to their families, and is particularly hard on their children.

This doesn't mean criminals should be let off the hook — when someone breaks the law, they still need to be held responsible and they still need to try to make restitution. However, throwing huge numbers of non-violent offenders — at a cost of \$35,000 a year each to Connecticut taxpayers — is not the way to go. Drug courts, treatment programs, and electronic monitoring with house arrest are all alternatives.

***Common Core** — Proving the adage about politics making strange bedfellows, the groups on the left and right who oppose the Common Core State Standards would likely be diametrically opposed on almost every other issue, yet they find common ground on the Common Core.

From the left, the Common Core looks like a corporate takeover of education and an enlargement of the testing regime imposed by the federal government on schools since the advent of No Child Left Behind. From the right, the Common Core is another sign that the federal government is trying to take over education, further eroding local control.

Both sides agree the implementation of the Common Core has been a disaster, leaving many parents and teachers frustrated and angry. Not to mention the kids, who have to be the guinea pigs for a new curriculum and lengthy tests.

Building consensus across the left-right divide could lead to smart policy changes in Connecticut, if we could just cut through the noise and prejudice to get there. As Nader said in his speech at Cato, our big institutions have an interest in keeping this from happening.

The “power structures believe in dividing and ruling,” he said, so they can “distract attention from areas where different groups agree to where they disagree.” It’s a clear strategy — if you keep the status quo the same, you keep the power. It’s up to us to see past the divisive rhetoric so we can disrupt the status quo.