



Evolution of Libertarian Republicans is a one-way street

By: Ken Braun – May 4, 2013

I know one of the more visible proponents of dialing back Michigan's marijuana prohibitions. A philosophical libertarian and businessman, he greeted the 2010 GOP takeover of state government as a mixed blessing: Good economically - probably a deep freeze for his pet issue.

But a funny thing happened: Republicans didn't stick to socially conservative stereotypes. You wouldn't know it - yet - from some of the rhetoric on the gay marriage front, but the war for the soul of the GOP is being won by fiscally tough, socially-tolerant libertarians.

Last week, State Rep. Mike Shirkey, R-Clarklake, signed on with an Ann Arbor Democrat's plot to lighten Michigan's pot possession punishment. He's not alone: State Rep. Tom McMillin, R-Rochester Hills, was asked to sign on with the same idea and declined, but said he wasn't necessarily a "no" vote either.

Some disclosures are in order.

I don't really know Rep. Shirkey, but my ex-wife works in his office. He signed the petition in support of GOP committeeman Dave Agema, following the initial controversy over the loopy things Agema posted about the "gay lifestyle" on his Facebook page. Shirkey is also one of the sponsors of the state's new Right to Work law, a principled position given his precarious address in union-heavy Jackson County.

This is no RINO. Is he what now passes for a hard-line social conservative?

Then there's McMillin: An established culture warrior with few peers before his 2009 arrival in the Michigan House, I expected him to be a cartoonish warrior against the supposed "gay agenda."

While he didn't abandon that script, it has hardly defined him. In addition to being the strongest of fiscal watchdogs over your tax dollars, he has sponsored bills demanding transparency in SWAT raids; has proposed improving the legal assistance to indigent criminal defendants; has led the opposition against the use of military drones; and led many other civil libertarian causes.

Libertarian-Republican Congressman Justin Amash, R-Cascade Township, has no greater champion in the Michigan Legislature, despite the likely difference of opinion the two have regarding the Defense of Marriage Act.

I never expected to be Tom McMillin's friend, but he left no options.

Twenty-five years ago, rock-ribbed conservatives in the Michigan Legislature probably got their talking points from sources like the John Birch Society. If you're one of the few remaining readers of The New American, JBS's news website, then you know they still shriek loudly over issues like the gay peril, opposition to immigration, and America's supposed cultural decline. (Though weirdly, even they now oppose the Drug War.)

But today, conservatives like McMillin frequently turn to the pro-freedom sources: His Facebook page often features libertarian-inspired posts from the Cato Institute and the Reason Foundation.

To unsophisticated liberals, all government skepticism looks the same. But it matters a lot whether the GOP future is ultra-conservative cranks or libertarians. The next generation of Americans can't afford Big Government reaching deeper into their pockets, and polls consistently show they don't want it in their personal lives either.

Are Republicans reaching back?

Ask yourself whether you know people who have changed their views regarding marijuana and homosexuality. Excepting for some reformed drug addicts, the evolution is almost always a one-way street: When sober people come around to opposing government prohibition, they don't re-acquire a taste for ordering others around.

"I'm not sure if Michigan is ready for this right now," Shirkey told MLive. "I don't use marijuana... never have, don't intend to, but I think it's the time for the debate."

I bet he's already had that debate in his own mind and will not become less of a libertarian in the future.