



COMMENTARY: Drinking the tea

By Michael Weymouth
Special to the Journal

Posted Mar 28, 2010 @ 08:00 AM

Hingham — The oft-used term “drinking the Kool-aid” has always bothered me for a couple of reasons. First my spell check always underlines the Kool half of it, and second it is associated with a tragic social disaster of epic proportion: for those who don’t know the term’s origins, it refers to the Jonestown mass suicides in 1978 in which over 900 followers of charismatic leader Jim Jones drank cyanide-laced Kool aid. Hence when someone is accused of blindly following a particular ideology or point of view, they are said to be “drinking the Kool-aid.”

Thus it is with some relief that I have begun to use the more contemporary term “drinking the Tea,” when referring to someone who is a follower of any hard and fast ideology. I am, of course, referring to the recently formed Tea Party, a political action group named after the Boston Tea Party. Many believe that the Tea Party was instrumental in rousing the dissatisfaction of Massachusetts’ voters to elect Scott Brown in the recent special election as well as sending a message to Washington that disaffected voters would no longer tolerate business-as-usual.

There are conflicting reports as to the origins of the Tea Party, and it is still a movement in flux. What is known is that it is a grassroots movement that reflects many of the core beliefs of Libertarian Ron Paul, which include cutting taxes and in general reducing the size and outreach of the federal government. Tea Party members are particularly incensed with the Wall Street bailouts and the rising national debt.

While their goals seem quasi-reasonable, the Tea Party tone of voice comes across as very polarizing. But that has not stopped the Republican Party, which is greatly in need of more traction with voters. To the consternation of many Tea Party purists, the Republican National Committee is moving in with the perceived goal of taking control. Like any such organization, the Tea Party has its moderate faction and, as more and more interest is generated, the organization has begun a slow drift toward the center. As a result, the Tea Party is actually starting to develop a platform, which to no one’s surprise, is looking more and more like a Republican platform aimed at the mid-term elections in 2012.

However, expect a lot of pushback from the Tea Party faithful.

For example, one of the pillars of the movement is to get rid of earmarks altogether. None of us likes earmarks, but when you consider that they increased by 500 percent under the Republican-controlled Congress during the Bush years and that 40 percent of the earmarks in the President’s latest budget are from Republicans, it would be a little disingenuous of the Republican Party to claim they are sudden converts to the movement to eliminate earmarks.

Another Tea Party pillar is the reduction of the federal deficit and in general balancing the budget. Again, the Republican Party is not the solution here either. If anything, it is the problem. The federal deficit grew substantially under the past three Republican administrations while it decreased under the Clinton administration. The libertarian Cato Institute seems to agree:

“Under the rule of George W. Bush and the Republicans, inflation-adjusted spending on the combined budgets of the 101 largest programs they vowed to eliminate in 1995 has grown by 27 percent.”

And Donny Ferguson of the Libertarian National Committee writes, “Eight years of a Republican president, six with a Republican-controlled Congress, resulted in bigger government, the biggest expansion of entitlements in 40 years and a \$700 billion bailout of Wall Street that continues to grow.”

And then there is Cheney’s 2002 comment: “Reagan proved that deficits don’t matter,” which does not exactly endear the Republican’s to the Tea Party.

The central Tea Party pillar is tax cuts, which is in line with Republican goals. However, consistent with its libertarian thinking, the Tea Party takes a much more radical view. For example, they are more closely aligned with Ron Paul’s theories when it comes to taxes. Paul advocates:

“Could America exist without an income tax? The idea seems radical, yet in truth America did just fine without a federal income tax for the first 126 years of its history.

“Prior to 1913, the government operated with revenues raised through tariffs, excise taxes and property taxes, without ever touching a worker’s paycheck.

“The harmful effects of the income tax are obvious. First and foremost, it has enabled government to expand far beyond its proper constitutional limits. Regulating virtually every aspect of our lives. It has given government a claim on our lives and work, destroying our privacy in the process.”

Suffice it to say that even the most radical wing of the Republican Party would find it difficult to embrace these ideas.

The 10th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution having to do with States Rights is on the Tea Party agenda as well. In general the Constitution seems to be bedrock for most Tea Party members. It is the fall-back position when anyone questions them: they believe that whatever the Founding Fathers wrote into the Constitution works as well today as it did when it was written, notwithstanding the fact that since the original Bill of Rights amendments 1-10, the Constitution has been amended 17 times. That aside, the Founding Fathers could hardly have imagined the complexities that the nation would one day face when they wrote the Constitution. What would they have done when confronted with “banks too big to fail?”

Some contend that the Tea Party is nothing more than a megaphone for disenfranchised Americans. In some cases, they may be Americans out of work or ones with legitimate grievances; however, the vast majority of Tea Party followers simply want quick solutions regardless of how complex the problems are. If the people in power cannot deliver on the fast track, then the Tea Party

solution is to vote them out of office.

If this is to be the attitude with which Americans choose their leaders in the future we are in trouble with a capital T, especially since we are in a global struggle to maintain American moral and economic supremacy in what is fast becoming a very competitive environment for hearts and minds and economic success.

The Tea Party has few answers for how to deal with these complexities. Perhaps they believe that macro results will be achieved by pursuing our individual goals, ala the Ayn Rand theory of Objectivism, which contends that when every citizen is a plus sign, the society as a whole is a plus sign. (I wonder if her theories would work with an NFL team where each player is allowed to follow his own game plan instead of playing as a unified team.) Tip O'Neill may have been right when he said "all politics is local," but voters need to wake up to the fact that, when it comes to global competition, the concern for local politics cannot work indefinitely to the detriment of global politics.

At the end of the day, rather than jump on polarizing bandwagons such as the Tea Party movement, we need to figure out how we can find common ground and work together. In this context, and pertaining to just one of the issues confronting the nation, a poll by Dan Arley was aired on NPR's Marketplace recently. The poll asked Americans two questions pertaining to wealth distribution. (Obama used the term "spreading the wealth" in his campaign.) They were:

1. What do you think the present wealth distribution is in this country?
2. What do you think is the ideal?

Those who were polled vastly underestimated the wealth inequity in the U.S. but surprisingly they were in far more agreement than Arley imagined, when it came to the second question. Arley's comments follow:

"Before the recession... we had the most skewed distribution in the Western world in terms of the haves and the have nots. But the more interesting question was what did people think it should be. And what we found was that there was a huge agreement between people in this respect. And this happened with both Marketplace listeners and the general sample population. You would think, for example, that Republicans and Democrats would have varied dramatically, but they didn't. I mean they differed but they didn't differ that much. Republicans basically agreed with Democrats, and those with low incomes versus high incomes basically agree.

"Essentially they said that the rich should be rich, but not that rich.

"The main lesson for me from this whole study is that when we look at the political arena, we have this huge polarization, and yet when we ask people a question that is not tainted by saying Republicans or Democrats – about what kind of society do they want to live in – the answers come out quite close. And for me that's the optimistic outcome of all of this for us as a society, I think we're much more similar to one another than the political arena suggests."

Amen!

I don't know what Dan Arley is drinking these days but it definitely is not Tea.

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I wonder if Mr. Weymouth has, in fact, attended any of the rallies? They are not filled with unemployed, disenfranchised people, but a mix of many different individuals unhappy with the direction our country is headed in. Certainly there are the unemployed, but overall they are people from all walks of life who believe that it is their duty and right to protest that which they believe is wrong.

The present admin has demonstrated a total lack of concern as to what the majority of Americans want. And regardless of what Mr. Obama thinks is fair distribution, the people of this country are the ones to decide how much they can earn. At least, until recently. It is curious, though, that protest is only viewed an American right when it is supports a left wing ideology.

thinkingman101

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The author makes the general assumption, like those on the extreme left, that the Tea Parties are just another name for 'Republicans'- nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps the author would attend a tea party himself so he can see the diversity of the crowd, in party affiliation, race and gender. The Tea party people are as disgusted with Republicans as they are Democrats, Bush as well as Obama. The driving force behind the Tea Parties is Fascist Government. The people don't want the Patriot Act, excess taxes, unjust wars or an outright socialist economy.