

Masthead

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## Money and rhetoric from the right

Ah, Labor Day, when candidates in fall elections put their campaigns into high gear (Who are we kidding? If they haven't been sweating for months to build up a fat treasury, they're toast). And here's another quaint Labor Day tradition in the making: The attack bus tour, coming to a town near you. A town with a Democratic congressman, that is.

Tomorrow it's Rockingham, Laurinburg, Raeford and Fayetteville, where the North Carolina chapter of the group that styles itself Americans for Prosperity will attempt to stoke fear and loathing of "big-spending" politicians who represent those parts in Congress. Billed as the featured speaker is former (and presumably future) Republican candidate for governor, ex-Charlotte mayor Pat McCrory.

Watch it, Pat - you're running with a rough crowd.

The task of bashing Democrats or anybody with a progressive or even moderate bone in his body continues Tuesday, as the AFP squad rolls through Clinton, Dunn, Nashville, Louisburg and Henderson. Rep. Bob Etheridge can expect to have his name taken in vain multiple times.

There has to be a certain irony in a group bankrolled by some of the country's wealthiest business types - people with a vested financial interest in low taxes and limp-wristed regulation - using the working man and woman's annual holiday as a springboard for its anti-government agenda.

Americans for Prosperity has as a national director none other than the ubiquitous Art Pope of Raleigh, head of Variety Wholesalers (owners of Roses, Maxway, Super 10 and other bargain-oriented retail chains). Pope, one-time GOP legislator and candidate for lieutenant governor, hardly needs an introduction these days as the kingpin behind the libertarian/conservative John Locke Foundation and Civitas Institute.

And he can't be accused of having his head in the policy wonk clouds - not when he regularly pours money into Republican Party coffers, including \$15,000 that helped get four conservatives elected last fall to the Wake County school board. The newcomers have thrown the school system's student assignment process into unnecessary turmoil - but it's all been in service to the greater glory of the local Republicans, who rallied their base and got more closely in touch with their inner tea partysers.

Yes, Americans for Progress and the tea party movement are like hand and glove. That's one of the enlightening points in a recent New Yorker article about brothers Charles and David Koch, who are to AFP and various other right-leaning outfits (including prominent libertarian think tank the Cato Institute) what Pope is to Locke and Civitas. Although when your combined fortune is the third largest in the country behind that of Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, as is the Kochs', you could buy Art Pope and give him away.

The New Yorker's relentless Jane Mayer lays out the Koch saga in the Aug. 30 issue. The brothers' father built a highly successful oil refining and pipeline business based in Wichita, Kansas, and things mushroomed from there into the stratosphere of wealth and power. Koch Industries, besides its petroleum operations, now owns such brands as Georgia-Pacific lumber, Dixie cups, Brawny paper towels and Lycra fabric.

The Kochs both are MIT-trained engineers. Charles is the Wichita-based top dog; David the Manhattan-based executive VP. David also is a giant of philanthropy, with gifts that include \$20 million to the American Museum of Natural History, \$40 million to Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and \$100 million to upgrade the New York State Theatre at Lincoln Center (now named for him).

The brothers' political spending takes the form of personal contributions, lobbying and money spun off by their tax-exempt charitable foundations. Amounts are incalculable, but Mayer suggests they easily top \$100 million over the last 30 years.

"The Kochs have given millions of dollars to nonprofit groups that criticize environmental regulation and support lower taxes for industry," Mayer writes, suggesting that self-interest as well as partisanship comes into play amid the constant savaging of Democrats from Bob Etheridge to Barack Obama.

Americans for Prosperity (which has a foundation set up under tax laws that allow it to engage in partisan activity) was a heavy-duty opponent of health care reform, and everybody knows that one of the opposition's motives was to drag Obama down. Now the rhetoric one hears from AFP and its tea party soul mates rips Obama and the Democrats as tax-happy socialists, lusty for power and scornful of American freedoms. When this kind of bilge is being pumped, it's a good idea to consider the source.

Certainly Art Pope isn't shy about spending money to flay Democrats. Just ask nine Democratic legislators whose districts recently have been targeted with mailers from an anti-tax group called Real Jobs NC. It turns out that Variety Wholesalers has given the group \$100,000 - a nice gesture indeed by the customers of Roses and other stores under the Pope umbrella who surely wouldn't want the state to have enough revenue to pay for, say, decent public schools. Or perhaps it's Pope who doesn't want that.

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