

Tea Party holds key to fight big government

BY TOM GRUNDY,

In the early days of oil exploration, our government saw a need to subsidize the effort. It was a new and risky business, and a few subsidies in the right places could be leveraged to jumpstart our economy into a whole new era.

Many decades later, in a world where oil company profits in the hundreds of billions have been commonplace for years, it would seem that the jumpstart worked. But there's a problem: we forgot to turn off the subsidies. In fact, we've been increasing them with reckless abandon.

The Energy Policy Act, signed into law in 2005, added about \$60 billion in subsidies over the following decade.

BP intends to write off its Gulf spill response and cleanup costs as a business expense — lowering its taxes by about \$9.9 billion.

According to Taxpayers for Common Sense, Americans directly subsidize the oil and gas industry to the tune of roughly \$31 billion per year, with line items like depletion allowances, royalty relief, and foreign tax credits. That number does not include quantifiable indirect subsidies such as military expenses to protect oil production and pipelines around the globe, oil spill liability caps, staggering pollution-related health care costs and lost productivity and more. Estimates of worldwide subsidies, by organizations such as the Cato Institute, go as high as \$600 billion annually.

So, wouldn't one of the best ways to "take back our government" while restoring "basic free-market principles" be to end these subsidies, and to hold accountable the politicians who have been benefiting from them at our expense for so long?

What would it take to end these subsidies? What would it take to hold our elected officials, both Red and Blue, accountable for this shameless hole in the levy?

What we really need is "a coalition of ordinary American citizens from all political affiliations that believe in free-market values who are concerned about the direction of this country's fiscal policy." The perfect plan would look like "a movement made up of millions of individual patriots aimed at restoring limited government and basic free-market principles our country was built on."

So reads the mission statement of the Tea Party Patriots.

This is a project we can unite behind! It would sure help if an organized movement, "made up of millions of individual patriots," could lead the charge.

Is this what common ground looks like?

Now for the challenge: talk is cheap; who will walk the walk?

Isn't this the perfect opportunity to prove wrong those who say that the Tea Party is no more than an outlet for cheap talk and unfocused anger? Isn't this a real chance to bring the impressive potential of an organized nationwide movement to bear on a problem that affects us all — a problem that can absolutely be changed for the better?

There are gargantuan hurdles, of course. Recent attempts to cut oil subsidies have fallen flat, for some compelling reasons.

First, oil companies have funded campaigns for public office for years. They have enjoyed a remarkable return on investment: for every dollar that the industry has spent on campaigns, they have seen a return of \$1,000 or more in the form of subsidies. Luckily, there are watchdog groups that have been helping to expose these connections. Spend a few minutes exploring DirtyEnergyMoney.com.

Second, recent efforts to shave subsidies (to the weak tune of only a few billion dollars) have fallen flat because of divisive wording in the bill, telling us how the savings should be spent. Solar, wind, nuclear, coal-to-liquids — each of these earmarks is a point of divisiveness. In the end, they lead to — or at least make a convenient excuse for — the death of the bill.

Maybe we can solve both of these problems at the same time: how about introducing a bill that cuts the subsidies, but very specifically does not say a thing about how to spend the savings? Then there are no more “offensive earmarks” or “points of contention” for well-oiled policymakers to hide behind. Leave the savings in the general coffers. Let other pieces of legislation decide how to spend it. One thing at a time. Could it be that simple?

This idea would need leadership. The potential for that leadership, and the framework to quickly take this idea to a national scale, already exists right here in Nevada County. The Tea Party could make it happen. The place is here, and the time is now. Any takers?

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