

The Economist

Heritage DeMinted

By: Will Wilkinson - December 6th 2012

AS MY colleague noted earlier, Jim Demint, a Republican senator from South Carolina, will vacate his senate seat and assume the presidency of the Heritage Foundation, an influential conservative think tank.

With Mr DeMint's move, all of Washington's three most prominent right-leaning think tanks will have undergone regime change in recent years. The changes are telling. Arthur Brooks took the reins of The American Enterprise Institute in 2008. Mr Brooks was previously a chaired professor of public policy at Syracuse University. A protracted struggle this year and last over control of the Cato Institute's board of directors resolved with the "retirement" of Ed Crane, who had presided over Cato since its earliest days, and his replacement as president by John Allison, an incredibly wealthy former bank executive with a commitment to the philosophy of Ayn Rand. And now Heritage, which has been helmed by Ed Feulner since 1977, will take on a high-profile Republican senator as its chief. These changes in leadership speak to the character of Washington's most influential right-leaning think tanks. The wonkish professor, the Randian banker, and the establishment Republican politician each tell us something about the priorities of the institution he was been chosen to lead.

During my tenure at the Crane-era Cato Institute, the idea that Heritage had increasingly become a research and propaganda arm of the Republican Party, and therefore no longer much of an independent conservative influence on Republican politics, had become common among even right-leaning wonks and journalists. The announcement that Mr DeMint will soon take over is sure to reinforce that notion, and rightly so. Jennifer Rubin, a conservative blogger for the *Washington Post*, is distressed by this prospect:

Let me first explain why this is very bad indeed for Heritage. Even DeMint would not claim to be a serious scholar. He is a pol. He's a pol whose entire style of conservatism—all or nothing, no compromise, no accounting for changes in public habits and opinions—is not true to the tradition of Edmund Burke, Russell Kirk and others. By embracing him, Heritage, to a greater extent than ever before, becomes a political instrument in service of extremism, not a well-respected

think tank and source of scholarship. Every individual who works there should take pause and consider whether the reputation of that institution is elevated or diminished by this move. And I would say the same, frankly, if any other non-scholarly pol took that spot.

Whether the reputation of Heritage "is elevated or diminished by this move" is not such a simple question. Surely the move will elevate Heritage in the estimation of millions of partisan Republicans who have barely heard of the Heritage Foundation and wouldn't know Ed Feulner from Adam. I expect that Mr DeMint, a favourite of the tea-party movement, will lead to a fund-raising bonanza. There is a clear sense in which that is very good for Heritage. That said, the institution's reputation among "thought leaders" as an independent conservative voice will surely suffer. However, as I've already suggested, this simply caps off an ongoing decline in Heritage's reputation for intellectual autonomy. Surely this will interfere with the ability of Republican operatives to pass off Heritage research as something other than self-serving partisan propaganda, but from another perspective, the advent of Heritage's DeMint era may look like the culmination of the foundation's mission. From this perspective, Heritage appears to have been *so successful* at exerting influence on the substance of Republican Party politics that it has become impossible to distinguish between the general stance of a dogmatically partisan conservative politician, such as Mr DeMint, and the general stance of the Heritage Foundation. Victory!

Heritage's ongoing piecemeal merger with the GOP may be a sign of corruption or success, but it's probably more-or-less inevitable. A good number of right-leaning think tanks were founded in the 1970s and 80s in large part to give conservative and libertarian intellectuals, who had struggled to find a place in academia and the mainstream media, a secure institutional perch from which to preach the gospel of "fusionist" conservatism to both the public and the complacent Republican Party establishment. For good or ill, success in this endeavour over the decades has indeed brought the GOP and many "independent" right-leaning institutions closer together. Initially, the liberal intellectual establishment at America's most prestigious universities and media outlets looked upon institutions such as Heritage with a mixture of pity and contempt. It was not until the past decade or so, when the influence of right-leaning think tanks on public and elite partisan opinion became undeniable, that the left scrambled to get into the game. When John Podesta, a White House chief of staff under Bill Clinton, launched the Center for American Progress (CAP) in 2003, he was aiming to combat the influence of conservative institutions like Heritage by building a left-leaning simulacrum. As Matt Bai reported in a 2003 *New York Times* piece:

[Mr Podesta's] goal is to build an organization to rethink the very idea of liberalism, a reproduction in mirror image of the conservative think tanks that have dominated the country's political dialogue for a generation.

[...]

"The rise of the machinery of ideas on the right has been impressive," Podesta told the gathering, to nods of assent. "People have noticed it, and we have talked about it. But we haven't really found the vehicles to compete with what's coming at us."

Going back to Barry Goldwater, Podesta said, conservatives "built up institutions with a lot of influence, a lot of ideas. And they generated a lot of money to get out those ideas. It didn't happen by accident. And I think it's had a substantial effect on why we have a conservative party that controls the White House and the Congress and is making substantial efforts to control the judiciary."

Podesta laid out his plan for what he likes to call a "think tank on steroids." Emulating those conservative institutions, he said, a message-oriented war room will send out a daily briefing to refute the positions and arguments of the right. An aggressive media department will book liberal thinkers on cable TV. There will be an "edgy" Web site and a policy shop to formulate strong positions on foreign and domestic issues. In addition, Podesta explained how he would recruit hundreds of fellows and scholars -- some in residence and others spread around the country -- to research and promote new progressive policy ideas.

The difference between Heritage and CAP is that CAP, founded by a faithful Clinton operative, has been a research and propaganda arm of the establishment Democratic Party *from the very beginning*. CAP was not founded to develop and propagate an upstart conception of liberalism, but to give a shot in the arm the implicit creed of the *status quo* Democratic Party. The prescient Mr Podesta smartly began where Heritage has, after decades of institutional evolution, only recently arrived. Mr DeMint's Heritage will join the Center for American Progress at the in-the-pocket partisan think-tank avant garde.