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Is Liberalitarianism Dead? Or Was it Ever Alive in The First Place?

Nick Gillespie | August 26, 2010

Tim Carney of the Washington Examiner riffs off the recent departure of Reason contributing editor Brink Lindsey from Cato to talk about the troubled proposed merger of liberals and libertarians under the banner of "liberalitarianism."

Lindsey's project - building political alliances between libertarians and liberals - is (or was) a bold one, and not impossible in theory. Cato and the Left generally agree on constraining federal surveillance powers, reforming detention of terror suspects, and humanizing our criminal justice system. Gay marriage, abortion, and embryo research also provide common ground. Lindsey coined "liberal-tarian" in 2006, and many Beltway libertarians vocally supported Obama in 2008.

But then Obama's presidency happened. Obama immediately passed the largest spending bill in history, and then he fired an aide who was trying to close Guantanamo.

He nationalized General Motors and stuck his hands into Chrysler's bankruptcy while escalating the war in Afghanistan. Obama required every American to buy health insurance and increased government control over health care. He's increased federal control over finance, mortgages, tobacco and food while fighting to get his hands on political speech, energy, and manufacturing. Obama is the greatest enemy of economic liberty most Americans have ever seen...

Lindsey, when he admitted in 2006 that invading Iraq was a mistake, still billed himself as "extremely controversial" and open-minded in the face of dogma. [David] Frum [who resigned from AEI], today, basks in the Left's praise as an independent thinker. But Lindsey and Frum, in backing Bush's invasion then and supporting Obama now, were the opposite of dissidents: They consistently supported those in power who were fighting for more power.

This pattern doesn't make Lindsey or Frum sycophants, but it undermines their claim to be dissidents.

Washington personnel moves are hardly the stuff of headlines, but this one exposes some dysfunctions, fears, and myths that will guide politics over the next two years.

Carney's col is here and, as always, worth reading in full.

I don't know anything about the process by which Lindsey, who I regard as a colleague and a friend, separated with Cato. And I'm not convinced that his or David Frum's shifts from one think tank to another place in the DC firmament means anything at all.

I do think that Lindsey's recent essay in Reason is absolutely essential reading if you care about the future direction of the libertarian movement (whether you agree with him or either of the other contributors to the discussion). And I also think that Carney is right about Obama. He's as terrible for an alliance between liberals and libertarians as he is for the country at large. There is basically nothing libertarian about the guy whatsoever on any issue (he's even a food and video game noodge, fer chrissakes).

As for the larger question of alliances across ideological boundaries, they're always worth talking about but rarely realized in any meaningful sense. Why should they be? It's heartening to see liberals (such as Matt Yglesias) rethink their knee-jerk reactions to deregulation and licensing laws, just as it's heartening to see some conservatives rethink their knee-jerk hatred of gays or GOP-initiated wars. But there's a helluva long row to hoe before either of these worn-out ideologies start to seriously sniff around for a truly different way of thinking about things, one that dispenses with right-left feints and starts to think along, say, a choice versus control axis (bold as love).