

[The Cato Institute's Supposed "Purge" of the Liberalarians](#)

[Ilya Somin](#) • August 24, 2010 3:45 am

At Slate, [David Weigel claims](#) that the libertarian Cato Institute may have purged its “liberalarians” — scholars who advocate an alliance between libertarians and the political left:

The libertarian Cato Institute is parting with two of its most prominent scholars. Brink Lindsey, the institute's vice president of research and the author of the successful book *The Age of Abundance*, is departing to take a position at the Kauffman Foundation. Will Wilkinson, a Cato scholar, collaborator with Lindsey, and editor of the online Cato Unbound, is leaving on September 15; he just began blogging politics for the Economist.

I asked for comment on this and was told that the institute does not typically comment on personnel matters. But you have to struggle not to see a political context to this. Lindsey and Wilkinson are among the Cato scholars who most often find common cause with liberals. In 2006, after the GOP lost Congress, Lindsey coined the term “Liberalarians” to suggest that Libertarians and liberals could work together outside of the conservative movement. Shortly after this, he launched a dinner series where liberals and Libertarians met to discuss big ideas.... In 2009 and 2010, as the libertarian movement moved back into the right's fold, Lindsey remained iconoclastic....

There are two big problems with Weigel's insinuation. First, Cato has not changed or even deemphasized any of its positions on those issues where they have long differed with conservatives including the war on drugs, immigration, foreign policy, and others. If they were trying to move “back into the right's fold,” one would think they would pulled back on these positions at least to some noticeable extent. Yet a quick glance at [Cato's website](#) reveals recent attacks on standard conservative policies on [Afghanistan](#), and the [“Ground Zero mosque.”](#) among other issues.

Second, it is strange to claim that Cato got rid of Lindsey for promoting a political alliance with the left at the very time when Lindsey himself [recently disavowed that very idea](#), stating that “it's clear enough that for now and the foreseeable future, the left is no more viable a home for libertarians than is the right.” If Cato objected to Lindsey's advocacy of an alliance with the left, one would think they would have purged him back when he was actually advocating it, not after he has repudiated it. Wilkinson does still favor liberalitarianism, but apparently only as a philosophical dialogue. He [holds out little if any prospect of an actual political coalition between the two groups](#).

Both Lindsey and Wilkinson have done much important and valuable work, and Cato is the poorer for losing them. At this point, however, there is no evidence that their departure was caused by a “purge” of liberalarians intended to bring Cato “back into the right's fold.”

CONFLICT OF INTEREST WATCH: I am a Cato adjunct scholar (an unpaid position). However, I am not an employee of Cato's, and have no role in any Cato personnel decisions. In this particular case, I didn't even know it was going to happen until it became public.