



Meet the Leading Opponent to Obamacare

By: Daniel J. Mitchell - December 10th, 2012

Having dealt with queries about whether I hate Republicans and whether my views have changed on anything, the newest edition of “Question of the Week” asks for my opinion about Senator DeMint moving over to become President of the Heritage Foundation.

Variants of this question came from several people, perhaps because folks know that I spent more than 15 years working for Heritage.

The short answer is that I think DeMint’s move generally is a good thing.

But first, the bad news. It is unfortunate that Senator DeMint no longer will be in the Senate. We need as many “Tea Party” lawmakers as possible since they are willing to fight for small government even when it means causing friction with establishment-oriented, go-along-to-get-along Republicans.

But DeMint’s departure won’t be too painful if Governor Haley of South Carolina appoints an equally strong advocate of small government to replace him.

Moreover, Senator DeMint no longer is a lone voice for liberty. There are now some very strong defenders of small government in the Senate, including Rand Paul, Marco Rubio, Mike Lee, Ron Johnson, and (beginning in January) Ted Cruz. You can get a pretty good idea of which Senators fight for freedom, coincidentally, by looking at the Heritage Action for America vote rating.

So hopefully Senator DeMint won’t be missed too much.

But what about the implications for Heritage?

Josh Barro thinks DeMint’s selection is a mistake because it means Heritage will be less of a think tank and more of “a political pressure organization with a policy research arm.”

But I disagree with Josh’s concern. Think tanks fill various niches in the battle of ideas. Heritage (even when I disagree with the organization) has an unparalleled outreach program to folks on Capitol Hill and it also has a very impressive capacity to bring information to the grassroots.

Those are good features. In other words, think tanks shouldn't all fit the same mold, featuring wonky guys with thick glasses publishing 50-page papers. Nothing wrong with that, of course, particularly since I'm a bit of a wonk myself. But just as diversity among governments is a good thing, so is diversity among think tanks.

What matters to me is whether DeMint will guide Heritage in the right direction. At times in recent history, it seems Heritage lost sight of its Reaganite roots. The organization, for instance, got some unfavorable publicity for supporting healthcare mandates (for friends of Heritage, this leftist video is very painful to watch). The Heritage Foundation also was far too timid last decade about criticizing Bush's reckless record of excessive federal spending.

Given DeMint's principled opposition to statism on Capitol Hill, I suspect he will lead the way in restoring Heritage's bona fides as a proponent of small government. That's very good news, especially at a time when congressional Republicans seem to be losing their nerve.

It's also worth noting that DeMint has some libertarian sympathies, as Nick Gillespie explains for Reason.

All things considered, Senator Jim DeMint seems like a very solid pick for the top job at the Heritage Foundation. Particularly since he presumably will be an effective fundraiser, which is one of the main jobs for the leader of a non-profit organization.

And since this post is about think tanks, let me take this opportunity to say some nice things about my employer. More specifically, I want to congratulate Michael Cannon, one of my colleagues at the Cato Institute.

He was just featured in the New Republic, a left-wing magazine, as the leading opponents of Obamacare. Here's a bit of what they wrote about him.

Can one very determined libertarian and one very distorted version of history keep millions of people from getting health insurance? We're about to find out. The determined libertarian is Michael Cannon of the Cato Institute. He was among the most vocal opponents of the Affordable Care Act, going back to the time when it was still a glint in the eyes of Ted Kennedy. The idea of universal coverage is so antithetical to Cannon's principles that he actually started an "Anti-Universal Coverage Club." Once the law passed and took on the moniker "Obamacare," Cannon became a leading advocate for its repeal. And since he understood the law might survive both the courts and the 2012 elections, as it eventually did, he also made the case that states should avoid complicity in its implementation—and, if possible, actively thwart it. He made that case in his writing and speeches, sometimes directly to the officials with responsibility for implementing the law. ...And no single individual has done more to make the case for state resistance to Obamacare than Cannon.

Kudos to Michael. You know you're doing a good job when your enemies are attacking you. Michael's also done great work on entitlement reform, and you'll recognize his mug if you watch my videos on Medicare and Medicaid reform.

At the risk of bragging, Cato is filled with people who make a difference. I've noted how Cato organized the first attack against Obama's faux stimulus when others were sitting on their hands. And it was Cato scholars who helped rejuvenate the constitutional case for limited government.

So I'm glad that Heritage is moving in the right direction, and it was great working there for many years, but there shouldn't be any confusion about the best think tank in Washington.