

BrainstormNW Editorial

Party Poopers

Open primaries and non-partisan races may bring an end to political parties

Fouad Ajami, professor at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, wrote last month on the op-ed page of *The Wall Street Journal* about civilization sage and Middle Eastern scholar Bernard Lewis. Lewis is best known, according to Ajami and others, as the scholar who before 9/11 predicted the rise of Islamic Fascism in his work “What Went Wrong?” Ajami writes of Lewis’ work:

In the American academy, he may be swimming against the currents of postmodernism and postcolonial history...but countless Arab and Iranian and Turkish readers recognize their tormented civilization in what he has written. They know that he has not come to the material of their history driven by bad faith, or by a desire for dominion. They take him at his word, a man of the Anglo-Saxon world, convinced that the ways of the West today carry with them the hopes of other civilizations. In one of his many splendid books, “Cultures in Conflict: Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the Age of Discovery,” he gave voice to both his fears and to his faith. “It may be that Western culture will indeed go: The lack of conviction of many of those who should be its defenders and passionate intensity of its accusers may well join to complete its destruction. But if it does go, the men and women of all the continents will thereby be impoverished and endangered.”

In the battle to save our civilization, University of Oregon President Dave Frohnmayer has as of late emerged as a combative. In a keynote speech last month at the Oregon Community Foundation’s annual meeting, Frohnmayer was clear about what he believes to be the negative drift of our culture. Spoke the U of O president: “If you leave with only one memory today, one sense of being filled by anything I say, it is this—that bitter partisanship, which is the political equivalent of road rage, threatens to leave us, a state and a people, a tangled wreck on the side of Oregon’s road toward progress...with every attack ad, with every ratings-driven no-holds-barred talk show program, with every ballot measure that divides, we grow sicker, more wrecked and more insane.” Frohnmayer, speaking often in a PBS Bill Moyers tone, admonished the audience to “count to ten” before continuing to engage in this civic destructive dialogue.

Days later, ironically, someone who forgot to count to ten would be Fox News heavyweight Bill O’Reilly. O’Reilly, on the day after the Oregon primary, ended an “O’Reilly Factor” broadcast shouting these words “Dave Frohnmayer is a coward who needs to be fired.” The controversy that caught O’Reilly’s attention was the publication by a student newspaper, *The Insurgent* (a Marxist/anarchist publication), that depicted Jesus in awkward and blasphemous sexual positions—“The Da Vinci” code on steroids. The students who published the cartoons did so in an attempt to make a point about the possible double standard in our own values versus what the West’s reaction had been to a Danish newspaper offending the Muslim world by publishing “the Muhammad cartoons.” To Frohnmayer’s credit he didn’t bite, and withstood the two days of O’Reilly’s national television campaign for his resignation. In the end, Frohnmayer’s counting to ten, made

the students look silly and the University look broad minded. It also exposed O'Reilly's fishing expedition for what it was—an attempt to create another Ward Churchill incident.

Frohnmayr did not stop at the OCF lunch with a critique of our current public discourse, he went on to advocate for and against certain measures that will be appearing on the Oregon ballot this fall. He came out against a spending limit for state government calling it “a cynical trick that would destroy an already emaciated state infrastructure.” He also advocated against a new term limits initiative. But mostly he used the luncheon to advocate for Oregon adopting an open primary and then eventually making the state legislature, or at least one chamber of it, non-partisan.

Our civic leaders believe that the bitter partisanship Oregon has known for more than a decade has caused our sometimes ugly public discourse and often shortened attention span. The solution: Get rid of political parties. The parties are the scoundrels. Is Frohnmayr right? Are the many Oregon civic leaders right about the corrosive role political parties play in the condition of our democracy, especially here in Oregon? Let's deconstruct this a little.

First of all, blaming partisanship for Oregon's problems in the last decade and a half seems short sighted. Ironically, from the time of Dave Frohnmayr's defeat in the Oregon gubernatorial election of 1990 to Ron Saxton's victory last month in the Oregon GOP primary, a span of roughly 16 years, only one political party in Oregon was capable of winning statewide elections. We wrote last month that we believe, thankfully, that era has ended. Rather than blaming Oregon's political parties for our problems, the blame seems better fitted to the state's most recent one-party status. Frohnmayr blames political partisanship for angry emails, heated talk radio and the heavy use of ballot measures. We believe Oregon's sometimes monotonous and not forward thinking public dialogue was caused by uncompetitive political situations, a confluence of '90s Left Coast liberalism, high-tech success and Clinton popularity. There is an important distinction here. If you analyze the problem the way Frohnmayr and Phil Keisling have, you'll find the answer the answer is to take the drastic measure of ridding the state of political parties. If you analyze the problem the way we have—that the state has been uncompetitive but is no longer—the solution: Engage in what promises to be a very competitive governor's race between Democratic incumbent Ted Kulongoski, Republican challenger Ron Saxton and independent Ben Westlund. For the first time in 16 years, Oregonians don't know who the next governor will be.

Democracy is hard business, and though George Washington may not have liked them, political parties have proven essential to our nation's 230-year experiment. Other democracies, those more recent than ours, have also found political parties essential. Recently, Germany entered into its second grand coalition of the postwar era—the two major parties deciding to temporarily share power due to a hung election. They did, however, decide not to rid themselves of party labels.

Proponents of an open primary will argue this fall that they are not attempting to end political parties, they are just trying to create a system where moderate voices will be the

ones on the ballot in the general election. Frohnmayer describes the benefits of the open primary this way, "Allow the disaffected independents to have a voice in the primary elections and mute the intransigence of ideological zealots at the same time. Recapture the center, from which both progress and stability usually flow." We argue: The center has been recaptured, after all. Ted Kulongoski, Ron Saxton and Ben Westlund are three pretty moderate people.

As for the other benefit of the open primary that Frohnmayer mentions, that of bringing independents back into the process, this gets to the heart of the problem. Starting with the vote-by-mail system, Oregon's leaders have continually put the blame on our shrinking democracy on the shoulders of our leaders and not our citizens. The attitude is to make democracy easy for citizens, entertain them, and, especially and most importantly, make it convenient. If vote-by-mail becomes only a short term fix, then let the independents into the primaries by making one big open primary. Whatever you do, don't ask more of the electorate. After all, it's their democracy too. We have soldiers fighting and dying in the Middle East, but only a third of our citizens care to vote, let alone put up a lawn sign, canvass a neighborhood, or, God forbid, even run for office themselves. Our citizenry wants entertainment. We obliged ourselves by cheapening the process. But democracy isn't cheap, and you either use or lose it. The fault, to paraphrase Mark Anthony, isn't in our political parties, it is ourselves, our culture. And, so far, political parties have done a pretty good job of helping protect us from ourselves. Each time you dismantle a component that makes democracy cumbersome, you also dismantle a component that makes democracy work and you move a step closer to tyranny. A former member of the Blair cabinet, David Blunkett, told the *Financial Times* in May that what the left fails to understand is that every time the public gets scared they move "right" not "left." Contrary to President Frohnmayer's opinion, political parties in the long run are a force against reactionary politics, not a force for them. So before you dismantle, do what the President Frohnmayer suggests: Count to ten ... and then vote No.