

Bridging Left and Right: A Foundation for a Transpartisan Politics

I often think it's comical
How nature always does contrive
That every boy and every gal,
That's born into the world alive,
Is either a little Liberal,
Or else a little Conservative!
— W. S. Gilbert, *Iolanthe*

Reading the sports pages recently, I realized that sports is the proper place for partisanship, not politics. Why? Because the political divide into right and left is bridgeable. The transpartisan ideal of non-ideologically driven politics is within reach. To realize it, we only need a model that shows that both right and left are valid, essential aspects of centralizing authority in collaborative governance.

In politics, the contest itself is not the point, but merely a means to the ends of liberty and justice and dignity for all. In contrast, in sports the contest is the point. Which team wins is everything, mirroring our predatory past, where "to the victor went the spoils." Sports appeals to us as it does because it harks back to archetypal predatory behaviors and reenacts them for us in harmless ways.

In politics, both right and left are essential and the zigzag between them merely reflects the ship of state tacking from port to starboard as it threads its way through the shoals into safe harbor.

Traditionally, the right has defended the rights of rank, while the left protects us from abuses of rank. Without the right, the state falls into dysfunctionality as hierarchies disintegrate to the point of paralysis or devolve into the tyranny of structurelessness (anarchy).

Without the left, the state and its officials self-aggrandize and creep towards autocracy and fascism. The higher purpose of political parties is to manage the dispensation of authority so as to prevent either of these two tendencies from dominating and permanently effacing the other. For the most part, democracies navigate between these shoals rather well, avoiding extremes of fascism and anarchy.

The reason that electorates divide into left and right is that both functions are indispensable to the long-term successful management of centralized authority. When either the left or the right gains in numbers and strength, an equilibrating mechanism is triggered that keeps the ship of state on an even keel: people in the center move politically in a direction opposite to the party in power. The

American 2006 mid-term elections provides an example of this self-correcting mechanism.

What from within a partisan perspective looks like an eternal battle between one's own enlightened party (the forces of good) and the misguided opposition (the forces of evil), is actually simply the workings of a self-equilibrating mechanism that maintains long-term equilibrium of the nation-state by providing continuous feedback.

Sadly, the left and the right have of late lost sight of each other's validity. This is okay in sports where it is fine to hate the Yankees (or to love them), but such ideologically-based partisanship is toxic to democratic governance. The result will be to replace alternating incremental shifts to the right and left of center with ideologically-driven lurches. As the oscillations gain in amplitude there is the distinct danger that one of them will keel the ship of state. Think Germany in 1933.

The proper stance toward political issues is not partisanship, but model-building. Political problems are resolved as we find a solution that protects the efficient and rightful uses of rank while shielding those served by office-holders from their inherent tendency, over time, to self-aggrandizement.

In the end, a goal that left and right can agree upon is to design governance systems that allow for initiative and timely decision-making while holding those entrusted with power — high-ranking officials — accountable to the people they serve. Every piece of legislation has to mirror this division of power: enough must be centralized to get things done, but not so much as to weaken accountability and make the temptation to abuse power irresistible. This design job is best thought of in a model-building context in which the validity of rank and the inherent tendency to abuse it are both recognized, and it is everyone's job to steer the ship of state between the six-headed monster of "Scylla" (wimpy ranklessness) and the whirlpool of "Charybdis" (self-aggrandizing rank).

This, in capsule form, is an analysis with which transpartisans can appeal to both conservatives and liberals. Political affiliation is a function of our relationship to authority: do we instinctively seek and trust power (conservatives) or do we instinctively avoid and distrust it (liberals)? There is no right/wrong about either tendency — except as it seeks to eliminate the other. Both are essential to maintaining long-term equilibrium. Without either, a state either implodes or explodes. Moreover, the organizations within the state must manage this same balancing act, or they too become dysfunctional. Even individuals who fail to find a proper blend of the two tendencies within themselves become maniacal dominators (bully bosses) or shrinking violets (invisible wimps).

It should be mentioned that "right" and "left" are merely labels for the two essential components of centralized authority in group governance. Over time,

the labels can flip. The “left” may come to stand for “rank-holders” and the “right” become the champions of the people. Think USSR.

As it stands today, many liberals and conservatives, while pretending that the other side is legitimate, secretly believe that the other side is fundamentally misguided. Authentic collaboration is inhibited because neither left or right actually appreciates both the validity of rank and the threat posed by it. The right is more worried about paralysis than predation, and the left is more worried about predation than paralysis. Neither extreme — libertarianism or egalitarianism — is up to the challenges of the 21st century. The transpartisan, post-ideological framework is an idea whose time is at hand.

A new synthesis — call it *dignitarianism* to contrast it with libertarianism and egalitarianism — provides a larger framework within which both liberty and equality find their proper places. Dignitarianism takes as its target indignity. Indignity is not caused by rank per se but rather by *abuse of the power attached to rank (rankism)*. Rankism is the source of indignity which in turn causes indignation which invariably results in a threat to social equilibrium (law and order). A dignitarian society is democracy's next evolutionary step.

Surprisingly, a dignitarian society — not a democratic one — is also autocracy's next step. Will America or China be the first powerful state to institutionalize dignitarian principles? The nation that does so will lead the world in the 21st century, much as democratic states led in the 20th.

Within the United States, left and right can together design legislation that addresses our ills, legislation that instead of single-mindedly promoting liberty or equality to the detriment of the other, is predicated on dignity for all that subsumes both. In this collaboration of left and right, those on the left will naturally emphasize that solutions must be universal, that dignity must be secure for everyone. With this objective the right will have no objection so long as a mechanism can be found that does not undercut initiative and authority so much as to render us all paralyzed and equally impoverished.

The right has championed libertarian principles and the free market in the name of avoiding such a stifling of energy, creativity and productivity. The free market, by virtue of its Darwinian elimination of businesses that perform poorly and offer inferior service, is, along with the democratic idea itself, a very effective anti-rankist mechanism. The marketplace, which antedates democracy, shields us from the rankism inherent in monopolistic economic power much as democracy protects us from the rankism attendant to monopolistic political power. Together, the free market and democracy constitute the most dynamic form of social organization we have going for us. By placing these two key institutions in a dignitarian framework, they will only become more so.

A proper goal today is not to avoid one kind of rankism or another (economic or political), but to avoid them both. Freedom is not enough; justice remains out of reach, except via the stepping stone of dignity. To achieve dignity for all, the traditional emphases of both left and right are required. The challenge is to find a workable synthesis of these two grand, indispensable traditions. Without either the ship of state will sink.

Dignity is actually what people want, more than liberty, more than equality. Freedom from the abuse of power by rank-holders is the goal, not license to do what we like. In this sense, dignity trumps unbridled freedom and strict equality. This explains why so many are content to live in authoritarian states so long as the authorities do not abuse their power. (Think Russia under Putin.) This explains why many societies are not attracted to democracy per se. What they want is not freedom, it's dignity, and they may feel that their more authoritarian system provides it while avoiding the excesses and indignities of democracies. However, if their rulers take the path of self-aggrandizement, which is virtually inevitable in the absence of accountability, then these people will begin to experience indignity and eventually they will revolt, often to settle for a new ruler who is perceived as more benign and dignity-respecting, but not necessarily democratic.

Western democracy is not the apotheosis of human political evolution. That is what the rest of the world is trying to tell us. Of course, none of the models they offer is the answer either. Again, the next step for both democracy and other systems of governance is a new synthesis. It's time to move beyond the straight-jacket of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." One or another of these rallying cries has shaped governments the world over for more than two centuries. The keystone, the polestar of good governance — Dignity for All — can guide us to new forms of national and international governance within which liberty and equality and fraternity all find their proper expression.

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