Progressive Republicans and Ron Paul

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I spent all day and into the evening Tuesday at Ron Paul's Rally for the Republic listening to speakers extolling the virtues of individual freedom and limited government. Wednesday morning I attended the progressive think tank Growth & Justice symposium heralding the contributions to the common good of Minnesota's Progressive Republican Tradition. That's like running out of a sauna and leaping into a lake through a hole in the ice — it can be exhilarating if it doesn't kill you.

At first blush, Ron Paul's libertarian-leaning brand of Republican conservatism seems to have little in common with progressive, left-leaning RINO (Republican in Name Only) Republicanism. Remarkably, however, beyond a shared aversion to what passes for "conservatism" in today's Republican Party, Paul supporters and progressive Republicans share a common objective: expanding prosperity and opportunity to an ever increasing number of Americans. But don't break out in a chorus of “Kumbaya” too fast; that common objective is not nearly enough to overcome the fundamental divide in the way the two camps view the world.

**Principle vs. pragmatism**
Paul supporters, with their focus on principle, understand that whatever common ground there might be between themselves and progressives of any party stripe is too soft to support compromise. Progressives, on the other hand, are outcome and solution oriented; pragmatic bipartisanship and compromise are not simply desirable but absolutely necessary to their concept of good governance.

"We must never be willing to give up the principles of individual liberty; instead we must convince people that progress depends on advancing even further this concept rather than succumbing to the ancient idea of political power residing in the hands of a few," Paul wrote in his notes for remarks at the Rally for the Republic. Even creating a government safety net "for a small percentage of the people," he argues, "sacrifices 100 percent of that principle."

In contrast retiring Third District Rep. Jim Ramstad, a Republican, told the Growth & Justice audience the challenge facing policymakers is coming together in a "bipartisan way" "to find solutions" and "get things done."

"Both extremes must govern from the center; the American people deserve nothing less," said Ramstad, who declared himself "proud" to have the most centrist voting record in the U.S. House.

Confusing "principle" with "ideology," progressives tend to react to a comment like Paul's as demonstrating an ideological-driven lack of compassion. They equate a person's being against a socialist solution spun as progressivism as opposing the humanitarian objective it's intended to solve when, in fact, opposition is based on desire to achieve the objective.
"The idea is well-entrenched that if one supports free markets...one cannot be a humanitarian concerned about the well-being of all citizens," observes Paul. "The truth is exactly the opposite. Although the socialist/welfare state may be supported by some who are truly concerned about their fellow man, there is no evidence that any system can provide more prosperity for the greatest number than a system based on individual liberty."

In fairness, progressives often take their ideological cues not from principle-driven Ron Paul Republicans, but from issue-driven conservatives (many of whom are gathered at the Republican National Convention), "conservatives" that for the sake of "unity" have effectively kept Paul out of the proceedings in St. Paul. They take their cues from conservatives with litmus tests on issues, conservatives as outcome-oriented as progressives themselves are.

Conservatives in partisan heat, on the other hand, will disregard Paul's observation that some people supporting welfare state polices actually are concerned about their fellow man. They take the low road of personal attack rather than educating people that progressive polices that look to government for solutions simply do not work in a reality that requires trade-offs.

**Progressive Republicanism – guiding principles**

The dichotomy between trade-offs and solutions is the practical difference between policies that stem from Paul's individual liberty/free market approach to governing and policies spawned by the progressive tradition of public and private partnership advocated by Growth & Justice. Economic prosperity and fairness are not incompatible, Growth & Justice President Dane Smith told the 150 or so people at the symposium. Economic justice can be achieved through a common sense approach with a "proper role" for government and a "proper role" for private enterprise.

A preliminary cut of a joint Growth & Justice/Twin Cities Public Television documentary (previewed at the symposium) defines the progressive vision as using government at every level to advance the common good. Guided by that vision, progressive Republicans played a key role in the success of Minnesota, said Smith. In addition to Ramstad, former Republican Govs. Al Quie and Arnie Carlson gave their views on Minnesota's tradition of progressive Republicanism.

Quie spoke first and quickly, albeit it unintentionally and unknowingly, got mired in the principle-ideology confusion. He set the dichotomy of being a fiscal conservative but without the dogma. "Principles are more important than party," he said, but the "principles" he went on to discuss were "thinking," "listening" and "loving." Quie extolled thinking, listening and loving as necessary for building bipartisan relationships. These admirable individual traits, however, are not principles of governance. Principles provide the context for what policymakers think about, whom they choose to listen to and even what they love.

"I'm so radical that I believe every child from birth to 8 ought to be learning in the environment of parents," said Quie. Were he still in power, Quie's preference would be a policy statement. "Of course, that would require cooperation of private business and government to make that happen," he added.
There are a couple of progressive principles and an assumption in play here. The first is that any one individual, or one party, can know what is best for every child – or every patient, or every homeowner, or every anything. The second principle at play is that government has a legitimate role to play in helping people raise their children as any policymaker believes they ought to be raised. The assumption is that even if government knows what is best and has a legitimate interest in getting involved, it can solve the problem and achieve the objective better than a system that leaves decision-making authority in hands of individuals.

Quie's example of progressive policy is precisely the attitude that is turning many people into Ron Paul Republicans.

I talked with a young couple with a toddler in tow after Paul's remarks Tuesday. When I asked why Paul's message of individual liberty appealed to them. How did they feel oppressed? The woman pointed to her child. "We still have freedom," she said, "but when he was born everything we did was monitored. We had to opt out of all kinds of tests and procedures at the hospital we didn't know about. We want to home school, and we don't know how many hoops we'll have to jump through to do that."

Here we see the first of many ironic confusions caused by progressive policy. We have parents that voluntarily want to do exactly what Quie thinks is best for their child, but in order to do so, they would have to seek (were Quie's progressivism made policy) government permission and navigate a maze of government requirements that would be barriers to that end. Other parents who might have a different set of values and priorities would find themselves caught up in a system where "freedom" is the necessity to "opt out" of something in which they never wanted to participate.

**Progressive Republicanism – government restraint**

Ramstad, who spoke next, characterized the progressive Republican tradition in the words of the late governor Elmer L. Anderson: "People need to do what they can for themselves, but government should do things for people that they cannot do, or cannot do as well."

Ramstad is the driving force behind the bipartisan-supported Mental Health and Equity Act, which would require insurance companies to provide coverage for mental health and treatment of addiction on parity with current coverage standards for physical treatments. Ramstad called the bill the "right thing to do" and also cited studies showing it was the economic and cost-effective thing to do.

What the representative did not talk about is where in his job description, Article I of the U.S. Constitution, is the authority granted to Congress to define what products a company must sell and individuals must buy. Where in the Constitution does it say or imply, "government should do things for people that they cannot do, or cannot do as well"? Are there any constitutional restraints on what Congress might do?

In a series of op-ed pieces in the Pioneer Press, Smith and I debated the question what it is that restrains progressives from expanding government beyond legitimacy. Smith's final answer is the ultimate extension of the "opt out" approach to "freedom." He wrote:
"In response to Westover's challenge to say 'what it is that restrains progressives from expanding government beyond legitimacy,' we would come back to the Declaration's assertion that 'governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just power from the consent of the governed' and that 'it is the right of the People to alter or abolish' their governments when they fail or exceed their limits."

The Declaration gets the principle right, but it is the Constitution, acting on that principle, that defines specifically the powers consented to Congress, notably defining the powers of Congress in Article I, Section 8 — to avoid the necessity of constant revolution. Smith doesn't seem to recognize the relevance of that list of enumerated powers. He went on to write in the Pioneer Press:

"So there it is. Rather than picking an arbitrary tax rate or percentage of income for public investment, or specific lists of things governments can or cannot do, the Founders wanted to let 'the governed' decide for themselves."

The progressive principle Smith is advocating is that the aggregate will of 51 percent of the people, not the written Constitution, determines the extent to which government can impose itself in the daily lives of Americans; because a majority elected Ramstad to Congress, he has the authority to impose mandates on private insurance companies and individuals purchasing insurance constitutional lack of an enumerated power to do so notwithstanding.

**Progressive Republicanism – the war metaphor**

Former Gov. Carlson hit clean-up for the panel of progressive Republicans and spoke to specific issues under the current "conservative" administration — government spending, global warming policy and a misunderstanding of war. Talking about the GOP convention in St. Paul, Carlson made the point that political parties keep out dissent. The definition of a "good convention," he noted, is that it is "well-scripted."

"When is a well-scripted convention the essence of a democratic society?" he asked.

Carlson, who during the question the answer session characterized current conservatives with the phrase "spend and borrow," challenged politicians saying, "If you aren't willing to make cuts on the spending or adjustments on the revenue side, you ought not hold office." Both parties, said Carlson, promise to cut taxes and increase spending. The passion and purpose of these Carlson comments would have found a welcome home at Paul's Rally for the Republic.

Speaker after speaker at the rally took the podium and criticized the GOP candidates for not talking about the budget deficit, the national debt and principles of sound money. One can only imagine the dead silence engulfing the Xcel Center had a speaker mentioned "sound money" and "Austrian economics" – phrases that frequently shook the roof of the Target Center (much to the bewilderment of some members of the media at the event).

Anti-war sentiment was strong as well. Bill Kauffman, author of "Ain't My America: The Long, Noble History of Antiwar Conservatism and Middle American Anti-Imperialism," summed up the principled conservative position well:
"We [the people] don't start the wars. That's the job of big city winners. They don't need God and guns. They have Blackberries. But we and our children pay for and fight in those wars disproportionately. Death and taxes – these to our rulers are the essences of patriotism."

But the confluence of outcomes and a common aversion to the brand and message of conservatism exemplified Xcel Center can't override the fundamental differences between progressive Republicanism and Ron Paul Republicans. Progressives still approach policy from the prospective of government inspired top-down policy decisions, a direct conflict with the free market, individual freedom position of Ron Paul Republicans.

Interesting to note, although not part of the Growth & Justice discussion, is that while the progressive movement today falls primarily on the anti-war side of the ledger, the accoutrements of war – sacrifice, unity of purpose, and mobilization of the entire society – are critical elements of progressivism. What was discussed by Carlson at the symposium was the urgent need to "do something" about global warming; he suggested forming a commission around Al Gore, and one of the names mentioned as a possible member was former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo. In a 1995 interview with the New York Times (quoted in Gene Healy's "The Cult of the Presidency") Cuomo recalls the good old days of World War II:

"The biggest event of my lifetime was the Second World War and we have never been able to recreate it. Some people say thank God, but there's something we lose by not recreating what happened in the Second World War. The Second World War was the last time that this country believed in anything profoundly, any great single cause. What was it? They were evil; we were good … We found strength in this common commitment, this commonality, community and family. The idea of coming together was best served in my lifetime in the Second World War."

One need not look very hard to see how the progressive approach to the "War on Global Warming" tries to recreate Cuomo's nostalgic recollections of a brutal conflict and mobilize the economy behind a plethora of regulation with profound social and economic impacts in the name of coming together for the common good.

The progressive principle at play here is that when individual needs and needs of the state collide, it is the state, the community, the common good that takes precedence.

The Fourth Estate
Another crisis Carlson highlighted, one possibly needing government intervention, is the steady erosion of the American newspaper.

"We cannot run a society without information," said Carlson. "The idea that you can get that information on the Internet is foolish."

Like Obama suggesting that he would use the tax code to reward companies that create American jobs at home rather than outsourcing opportunities, Carlson suggests that we could work with the tax codes to ensure that the media succeeds. He noted that the British have set up a trust fund to aid media. He also said we'd have to be careful not to breach the wall between
government supporting the press and the integrity of the press – an admirable objective that flies in the face of the reality that power corrupts.

We have to get away from people turning only to the news they like, Carlson said. "We need news without bias, but we also need news that allows critical thinking." Without critical thinking, we become a think-alike, look-alike society. All well and good, but when it comes to thinking critically about the process of progressive policymaking, progressives seem to take a pass.

A final observation about progressive Republicanism: After two hours at the Growth & Justice symposium spent in part talking about the motivations and incentives and the traits of human nature that have made conservative rule ineffective, progressive proposals would simply change the desired outcomes of government policy without changing any of the basic processes of government that run counter to human nature and reality.

While it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between power-seeking Democrats and Republicans, the line between outcome-oriented progressives of all party stripes and Ron Paul Republicans grows increasingly sharp. The focus of progressives is on public and private partnerships to provide aggregate solutions to what policymakers think ails society. The individual freedom approach of Ron Paul Republicans trusts individuals to determine through market transactions what's really a problem and what isn't and then says let free market forces determine what trade-offs will be made. Progressives believe, like Cuomo, that it takes a "moral equivalent of war" to bring people together. Ron Paul Republicans believe "freedom brings people together" more effectively than any government imposed system.

Kudos to Growth & Justice for an outstanding symposium. It could have been better only had it focused less on what's going on at the Xcel Center and more on activity at the Target Center. That would have been exhilarating.