

Bipartisan vs. Transpartisan: And The Winner Is?

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Now that we have finally flushed the word “chad” from our power talk and political cartoons, lo and behold, “bipartisan” enters the fray. One gets the distinct feeling politicians put tongues firmly in cheeks whenever they utter the term, realizing they must embrace same along with motherhood, the flag, and Starbucks coffee. It’s now fashionable to be “partisan-ly” correct.

The recent election, like a sudden lightening bolt in a dark, rainy night that momentarily illuminates the land contours, has exposed the deep divides in our society. The fault line runs through ethnic, racial, religious, gender, political, media, judicial, and social neighborhoods. When political parties are virtually 50/50, neither has a mandate to call the shots. Destructive grid-locks are often the result.

So, the prefix “bi-” appears to reassure us that our parties, both ancient enemies and contemporary protagonists, will subdue their natural inclination to engage each other in World Wrestling Federation-like bouts. Yet, political juices are high octane and explosive. Revenge and get-backs are strong motives. Potomac fever is contagious. Neither party can walk the bipartisan talk very long.

Unhappily, bipartisanship won’t get it done anyway. We need something different at this time in our history. Consider the merits within “transpartisan” or “beyond partisan” perspectives.

You know what nonpartisan means. Parties don’t matter at all. Only parties and their respective perspectives and perks matter. Yet, clear partisan tones are often healthy, especially when tuned to life conditions. Sometimes a right tilt is congruent; other times a tilt left makes sense.

And bipartisan leaves the false impression that the two warring entities with respective lobbyists and media megaphones can stand down from doing what they do naturally. The Rush Limbaughs of the world and his counterparts on the Left Wing of American politics, declare bipartisan to be a devilish word, equating it with selling out.

Bipartisanship leaves out all of the other parties and interest groups while transpartisanship transcends but includes them all. Everybody is invited to the table. While bipartisan politicians operate beneath the cloak of the win:win game, transpartisan leaders seek after the Power of the Third Win – society itself must win. Transpartisan problem solvers hang their plumb bobs over a specific problem, then cobble together from the full range of “conservative” and

“liberal” possibilities the exact equation that will work at different steps and stages in societal development. They don’t sit in consensus circles contemplating emotional navels nor do they tarry long in the camps of ideologues or political flame throwers.

There are times when transpartisanship must be used to set a system right, to overcome decades of extreme views and cultural wars, to intervene in times of extreme emergency, or even to appear when a country is evenly divided into two camps, thus producing a vapor lock. Transpartisan thinking cleans the deck, rewinds the clock, and resets the hands. Then partisan, nonpartisan and even occasional bipartisan efforts keep the system in motion until, sometime in the future, transpartisan perspectives and efforts are once again necessary. The complexity and diversity in our society have outstripped the bipolar political processes that attempt to contain them, like new wine in old wineskins.

The real challenge confronting President-Elect George W. Bush and the Congressional leaders in this new century is to move beyond bipartisanship. They must, during the next year, elevate their respective games onto the transpartisan level. Last October candidate Bush said in an Albuquerque speech: “There are good people in both parties willing to rise above the confrontation and stalemate of the last eight years. People who are ready for a fresh, bipartisan approach.”

I think he means transpartisan.

Actually, Bush’s natural engaging style fits this transpartisan mode. There are others. Mark Gerzon from Boulder, Colorado designed and implemented the popular “bipartisan” Congressional retreats in 1997 and 1999. He taught transpartisanship. William Ury from Harvard has pioneered this approach in dealing with the difficult global conflicts by augmenting “The Third Side.” Definitely, transpartisan.

The Florida Fiasco has taught us a valuable lesson. We now search for cohesion in this age of fragmentation. Neither partisan nor bipartisan methods can save the day. We are at this stage not because of the failure of our political processes, but, rather, because of their amazing success.

Do we now have the collective wisdom to reinvent our political wheels? The answer does not lie with politicians. The bell of responsibility tolls for us.

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