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Montana Style -- The Koch Bros. & Talking Cows

A Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett

June 1, 2015

As I stood in the State Capitol rotunda on April 29 and watched Governor Steve Bullock sign the expansion of Medicaid, I was proud of our state and its people. Sure, I went to watch because I had written three columns about the issue over the previous year. I went because the signing symbolized the triumph of moderation and compromise over ideology, partisanship and extremism. I went because good policy for people was trumping soiled politics. I went because I wanted to celebrate Montana saying NO once again to out-of-state moneyed interests who were trying to dictate policy to the people of Montana, but came up short.

Passage of the Montana HELP Act was a flat out rejection of the efforts of the infamous Koch Brothers and their Americans for Prosperity (AFP) juggernaut, which thought they could use brute political power and unlimited money in a way that hurt Montanans locally just to make a national political point.

Yet this was not the first time Montanans stood tall and rejected this kind of out-of-state effort. Thirty-three years ago, Montanans also rejected the similar efforts of a right-wing, powerful, well-funded national group who were trying to take out respected Montana Senator John Melcher when he was up for re-election in 1982.

Thanks to Montana's streak of independence and some talking cows, the National Conservative Political Action Committee (NCPAC) was sent packing by Montanans.

What was the context of this NCPAC intrusion into Montana politics? Just two years earlier, NCPAC was the leading political force which helped unseat nine well-respected Democratic US Senators allowing the GOP to take control of the US Senate as Ronald Reagan entered the presidency. Two of those senatorial losses were very close to home: Frank Church in Idaho and George McGovern in South Dakota. So, following those 1980 wins, NCPAC sharpened its knives, licked its chops and made Montana's John Melcher its #1 national target for 1982.

Much like the Koch Brothers' AFP targeted Montana and Medicaid Expansion in 2014 and 2015, in 1982 NCPAC "high-rollered" into Montana with a lot of money to defeat John Melcher. In both cases, they were sent packing by common-sense Montanans.

NCPAC put over 1000 political ads on the air claiming John Melcher "was too liberal for Montana." Those ads were almost all local network TV ads, the only game in town in those days. It was daunting. It was scary. I know because I was working on John Melcher's Montana field staff and was helping manage his 1982 reelection campaign.

The campaign and the Senator concluded that we had to fight back. We had to point out from where these attacks were coming. We had to let Montana's know how much money was being brought into the state to bludgeon Montana into NCPAC's political

corner. Once Montanans knew the facts, we hoped they would see the attack for what it was worth --- little or nothing.

Credit Senator Melcher, who was the Senate's only veterinarian, with the idea that we should use some truly native Montanans – talking cows – to reveal the NCPAC story to Montana voters. As Ben Goddard, our media consultant, and I sat in a Billings hotel room to draft the text of the ad, little did we know how it would play out.

Wikipedia says it well, referring to the “moo cows for Melcher” ad: “Melcher's response became a classic of campaign advertising, featuring a shot of an ‘out-of-stater’ carrying a briefcase full of money, followed by a conversation among several cows deploring their intervention in the race.”

“Montanans aren't buying it, especially those who know bull when they hear it,” said the announcer. One cow said that the out-of-staters “had been stepping in what they're trying to sell,” while another noted, while she nursed a calf, that “he kept calling me a steer.” Google up “Melcher talking cow ads” to see the famous ad itself and a lot of textbook narrative about it, as it has become demonstrative of using home-spun humor to make a political point.

So, NCPAC was ridiculed and laughed out of the state. Melcher won reelection with a 13% margin over his GOP opponent. But this is no laughing matter. NCPAC was serious and the Koch Brothers and their Americans for Prosperity outfit are serious, too.

And Montanans need to remain serious about telling these big-money out-of-state individuals and groups to take their bad ideas and go home. That's another reason I was in the rotunda celebrating on April 29.

(Personal note: Condolences to Senator Melcher and his family over the loss in late May of Ruth, his wife and partner of 69+ years.)

This is Evan Barrett in Butte, thinking about Montana's streak of political independence.

Evan Barrett of Butte, has spent the last 45 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.