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GOP Purists Burning Down Party's Big Tent

A Column by Evan Barrett

May 28, 2019

Political parties in the US are built on the “big tent” idea. Our political system at all levels evolved early on to one of majority rule. The rule is simple -- fifty percent plus one gives control. In America and Montana that has produced electoral battles between two major political parties. While minor and third parties do exist, they are just that: minor.

We differ greatly from parliamentary systems around the world, where it takes multiple political parties coalescing to achieve the 50% level. Here, presidents and governors come from one of two major parties, not a coalition of smaller parties.

And legislative control is also based on who has 50% plus one of the elected members. For a political party to gain that level of control their philosophy has to accommodate a broad spectrum of ideas. In political parlance, parties try to bring related but differing points of view together under one big tent. The old political expression “politics make strange bedfellows” arises from that. Fifty percent plus one requires a big tent party.

That's why the current and ongoing effort of a band of right-wing Montana legislative Republicans engaging in a philosophical purge of their membership makes no sense. Driving people from a political party for philosophical purity purposes – shoving them out from under the big tent – may be satisfying to those doing the purging, but it's a recipe for achieving minority status. Those people will have to go somewhere and, in a two-party system, if they are not with you they will be against you – resulting in lost power and control from eventually falling below the 50% threshold.

Right-wing Republican legislators want to get rid of the “solutions caucus,” Republican legislators who have kept their principles, but have worked across the aisle with Democrats to produce meaningful legislation, solutions to important problems and a balanced budget that attempts to meet the needs of Montanans.

Accusing some of their fellow Republicans of being RINOs (Republicans In Name Only), right-wing GOP legislators have been trying to remove those members through primary election challenges from the right in addition to making life as uncomfortable as possible for them if they remain elected.

The labeling of some as RINOs raises the question of who actually represents the true Montana Republican Party, the far right of today or the main street, main stream Republicans I worked with over many years. The GOP itself will determine that, but I find the current effort to tilt the Montana GOP to the ultra-far right to be a purist movement away from a GOP which is close to Montana's governing center.

In Montana the majority needed to win elections and govern generally comes from one side or the other of the political middle. Most Montanans are not out on the political extremes, they're under the center of a political bell curve – the big tent. Montana Republicans win and govern best a little right of center while Montana Democrats win and govern best a little left of center. There is a working majority in the center because that's where the bulk of Montanans are, Montanans who also expect that their representatives can find ways to work together.

The concept of the political big tent is that to be the majority, a political party needs to be attractive to a wide range of ideas, personalities and philosophies. That complex mosaic makes up what is under the big tent of successful political parties.

Purging party members is like burning down the tent under which those diverse party members coalesce -- a march to minority status. This has happened before in Montana and also in other states. While a general philosophical bent marks each political party, a drive that results in too much political and philosophical purity leads to minority status. That is the path that some in the Montana GOP are pursuing. Only time will tell us the results.

So, if Montana GOP extremists burn down their tent, making it more pure but smaller, I am sure the Montana Democratic Party will make its big tent welcoming and accommodating to former main stream Republicans who are looking for a political home. That is the way the world works.

Evan Barrett lives in historic Uptown Butte after retiring following 47 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history videos who continues to write columns and commentaries and occasionally teaches Montana history.

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