

Murray Rothbard's **The Importance of the Caucus** was written at a tumultuous time for the Libertarian Party. It appeared in *LP News*, January-February, 1980. Below you see it as it was reprinted by the Libertarian Party Radical Caucus.

In 1978 the Cato Institute had been formed and Rothbard and several other prominent figures were "one big happy family", supported by a billionaire's generous funding. Located in San Francisco at the time, Cato became the center of the libertarian movement, and with Ed Clark as the Party's 1978 California gubernatorial candidate, Cato was also the de facto center of the LP. Cato President Ed Crane was the mastermind behind Clark's campaign, which garnered a stunning 5.5 percent of the vote.

Clark was persuaded to be the LP's presidential candidate in 1980 and the same people were in charge of the campaign. They crafted the slogan "Low Tax Liberal" to describe Clark, which sent Rothbard, his close friend Bill Evers, and others up the wall. This was a logical culmination of what Ed Crane called "reasonable radicalism," designed to appeal to liberals. Clark's stands did not look very radical at all. Crane and his crew were the "bureaucratic hacks" referred to by Rothbard below.

Rothbard fought this opportunism tooth and nail. The fight continued past the Clark campaign, and ended with the bruising battle in 1983 over the party's next presidential candidate. This battle was the undoing of the Radical Caucus itself, when the Central Committee split over who to endorse—Earl Ravenal, the candidate of the Cato/Crane faction, or David Bergland, seized upon at the last minute by the opposition when their original candidate, radio talk show host Gene Burns, was revealed to have made pro-interventionist statements and refused to withdraw them. Rothbard resigned from the LPRC when it endorsed Ravenal. The Cato faction then walked out of the National Convention when Ravenal lost by two votes, never to return to the Party. Membership in the Party fell drastically and it struggled for years to return to the degree of organization it had. Rothbard thought it a worthwhile trade, implacable enemy of opportunism that he was, though he later left the LP altogether when the

Party, rather than orient itself to the great issues of the day, seemed to concentrate on personalities. For more details, see *An Enemy of the State*, by Justin Raimondo (Prometheus Books, 2000), the illuminating and inspiring story of Rothbard and his life's work.

The lesson I take from this is that *one must know everything about a candidate*, especially what he or she has said and will continue to say that conflicts with the Party Platform. When a new libertarian joins the Party and immediately runs for office, especially a prominent office, there is great danger that his or her pronouncements will mislead the public, anger other Libertarians, or both. This is something the Party should explicitly address.

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Essays In Radical Libertarian Thought

The Importance of the Caucus

by

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One recent phenomenon in our Party that burst into prominence at the September [1979] convention is the caucus. There are now at least five caucuses in the Libertarian Party and all of carried weight at the convention: The Association of Feminists, the Christian Libertarian Caucus, the Gay Libertarian Caucus, The Libertarians for Life, and the Radical Caucus.

Many Libertarians look with suspicion and hostility upon caucuses. Aren't they meant to be divisive? Couldn't they portend disastrous splits within the Party? Aren't they obstructing the smooth machinery of LP advance? Since we're all libertarians, why are any special caucuses needed?

I submit, on the contrary, that caucuses and factions are not only legitimate, but beneficial and necessary, and that their proliferation is the sign of a healthy Party.

In the first place, the Libertarian Party, in contrast to our the Democrats and Republicans, is and must be an *ideological* party—a party firmly dedicated to the triumph of consistent principle in politics. There is always a problem in any fast-growing party that ideology will be forgotten in a fascination with technique and even in the scramble for political power. If we are to keep our reason for being, this must never be allowed to happen, and the purpose of a caucus is to keep reminding the Party of its own ideology and of its day-to-day importance in Party activity and Party life. In a sense, a caucus acts as the Party's conscience.

Secondly, our libertarian ideology is a mighty and complex one, and there are bound to be differences of emphasis among Libertarians on which parts of the ideology to stress, or even conflicts over parts of the ideology itself or over its application to concrete political problems. Good libertarians, for example, differ strongly over such questions as children's rights or capital punishment. The caucus, therefore, exists, to push its particular application or emphasis within the broader Libertarian framework, and to try to convince the rest of the Party of the correctness of its own particular view.

The Party, furthermore, has become too large and complex, and its growth too rapid, to permit all ideological discussion and controversy to be jammed into two terribly hectic days at each biennial national convention. It is no longer enough to have a brief platform discussion every two years, as important as the platform is. It is also vital to have continuing, day-to-day discussions over ideology and political issues. The caucus, with its periodical publication and its organized meetings, provides a vital means for these discussions to take place on a continuing basis. In this way, ideology within the Party is not stifled, but on the contrary is

vivified, discussed, taught, thought about, and made a vibrant, integral part of the life of the Party.

There are forces with the Party, however, that are not simply confused about the role of caucuses and factions in a healthy ideological movement. They understand full well the role of factions and are therefore out to suppress them. These are the bureaucratic hacks and the seekers after power who regard all dissent and healthy ideological controversy as obstructions in an otherwise smoothly running organizational machine.

These are people who care little or nothing about principle or ideology and simply wish to "get on with their job" (*their* job) and to "go along with the program" (*their* program). These are the ones who would like to see the Libertarian Party and the libertarian movement as a whole run like a giant corporation or a military command post, with themselves, of course, at the top.

Caucuses and factions guard against all that. Their existence and prosperity assure that the corporate or military model will not become the working structure of the Libertarian Party. They assure diversity, dissent, and continuing ideological discussion within the Party. Factions are our insurance against the death of ideology, and against the crushing of a vibrant spirit in the maws of an unprincipled bureaucratic juggernaut. In the history of ideological movements, it is well to remember *who* were the most notorious crushers of factions with a Party: Lenin, after he achieved power in Russia, and especially Stalin, who suppressed all factions by sending them to the Gulag.

I am not trying to be an alarmist about this, nor am I maintaining that our version of the Gulag is around the corner. But any growing and successful ideological movement is bound to give rise to Stalins in our midst, to bureaucratic power-wielders who wish to play down ideology, and to suppress dissent and factions in the name of alleged efficiency. We should all simply be on guard, and the proliferation of Party caucuses is an excellent way of keeping such tendencies in check.

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