

A More Civil Union

William E. Brock
Former U.S. Senator, Secretary of Labor
and U.S. Trade Representative

July 2005

What has happened to politics in this country? I'm old enough to know that the 'good old days' weren't always that great, but I believe the evidence of a serious deterioration in political civility and a dramatic escalation in overt partisanship is compelling.

It was the early 1960's. I was young, green, inexperienced, and newly elected to the Congress of the United States. My late wife and I had found a 22 foot wide substantially overpriced house in Washington's Cleveland Park and were just starting to unpack when Tennessee's senior Senator called to invite us for dinner. Nancy and Estes Kefauver not only hosted a reception and dinner party to welcome us to Washington, but they went out of their way to make us feel warm and welcome.

Here was a nationally prominent Democrat leader in the United States Senate, who had run for President, and yet, he took the time and the effort to make a very young and very new Member of Congress of the opposite Party and his wife feel welcome in Washington. I think of that often when I look at how people treat each other in our nation's capital these days.

Few in this room will remember those days: Kennedy defeating Nixon and then being assassinated; Lyndon Johnson taking the presidency and being opposed by "Mister Conservative," Barry Goldwater, the latter being my hero of those years and that of many others in our area as well.

As a young militant conservative, albeit of a somewhat different stripe than those we see today, I was quite sure that I could separate the good guys from the bad by label. Obviously the good guys were the conservatives and the bad guys were the liberals, people like Jacob Javits of New York and Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota. It is easier to categorize somebody before you've shaken their hand, but those two in particular went out of their way to make me feel welcome when I came over the Senate, again as a very young and green new Member.

I'll never forget having lunch with friends from Tennessee in the Senate dining room. Hubert Humphrey, who had lost to Nixon in the Presidential race a couple of years earlier, came into the dining room, saw me, walked over to the table and shook hands with my friends and then said, "You're sitting with one of the finest Members of the United States Senate. Bill Brock is one of the special ones, and if he would let me, I would put him on my ticket to run with me as Vice President any time. I'm proud of him and proud to know him." You have no idea what that means to some new Member like me, and how impressive it was to my friends.

So lesson number one, don't judge a book by its cover, a person by their label.

I had other lessons in those days.

As a young pro-business conservative, I was hearing a lot about the overwhelming burden of paperwork brought about by excessive federal rules and regulations, and decided to do something about it. I served on a committee with Adlai Stevenson, whose father was so prominent in the previous decade, having run for President in 1956. He and I sat together and wrote the Paperwork Reduction Act which passed the Senate.

About that same time, a young woman on my staff, Emily Card, came to me and said, "Do you know, it is really inexcusable that women can't get credit in their own name in this country?" I said, "That's just crazy, of course they can." And she said, "No, they can't, Bill, and I think we better do something about it." I said, "Emily, bankers can't be that short-sighted. I'd like to see some proof."

Well, I had underestimated Emily's network. In about six weeks, we had close to 10,000 pieces of mail from women in 50 states, saying that they were denied credit cards or even mortgage credit, including the woman who was mayor of Davenport, Iowa, turned down by American Express. So we set about trying to rectify that. Emily and others on my staff wrote two bills, and we identified a terrific co-sponsor in the House to carry the bill there. Her name was Lindy Boggs. Her husband, Hale Boggs, had been a Democratic leader of the House who was killed in that airplane crash in Alaska. Lindy carried these two bills in the House. I carried them in the Senate.

The American Bankers Association told me that they would have to oppose any such bill, that it was ridiculous, they weren't ready, they needed more time, and I said, "You guys are taking your life in your hands if you think you are going to oppose legislation to give women the same rights that any 21 year old man has." There was one dissenting vote; I can't remember whether it was in House or in the Senate. Democrat Lindy Boggs and I had a terrific partnership.

One final very quick example: we were in a catfight on the Government Operations Committee regarding our efforts to put some logic into the Congressional budget process. Ed Muskie and I were walking out in frustration after one of those meetings, and I said, "You know, the two of us could write a bill that would solve these problems." And he said, "Well, why don't we do it?" We literally went over to his little cubby hole office in the Capitol, called his legislative staff director and Harrison Fox from my staff. We sketched out the components of that bill, and they drafted it, and not too many weeks thereafter, that bill passed in the Senate as the Senate Budget Reform Act, written by a prominent Democrat and a new and young Republican.

The sum of all this is to say that it did not occur to me not to cross the aisle and find someone who shared my view on a particular issue and seek their support, because I thought that's the way you should do things.

Lesson number two, it is the way you should do things.

I lost the next election, together with Gerry Ford and lot of other friends who got clobbered in the post-Watergate flood tide against Republicans. Four years later, having recaptured the White House and the Senate, I was invited into the President's Cabinet by President Reagan. I watched him ask Democratic Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, Russell Long, to carry his tax reduction bill, and I'm not sure whether it could have passed without Russell's agreement to do that. The economic malaise of 21% interest rates and 12% inflation which beset this nation in the 70's ended with that bipartisan action.

In my own trade area, I was trying to initiate Free Trade Agreements with Israel, Egypt, Canada, Mexico and other countries, a new Trade Round and substantial improvements in our basic trade

law. It would have been almost impossible for me to win the day had I not had the active support of Democrats like Senator Pat Moynihan, Congressman Dan Rostenkowski, Congressman Sam Gibbons, all of whom were on the other side of the aisle, all of whom were perfectly willing to sit and listen to a rational argument of why we needed to work together to solve a problem.

The golden thread running through all this: I have had a lifetime of experience in the absolutely crucial importance of civility, integrity, courtesy, good manners, and just plain human trust.

Speaking to a group of young college scholarship winners last month, I said "The reason adults told you not to lie, cheat or steal is not because you might get caught, it is because if you do those things, no one will trust you, much less hire you. Life is about relationships, and relationships are always built on trust."

It's my experience that you don't have to agree with someone to respect them for being intellectually honest in coming to a different conclusion. Honorable people can disagree and still have a beer together, and respectful adversaries can even learn from each other. Somehow that recognition seems to be missing from much of our national conversation.

I know we can do better. While there are countless reasons for this breakdown, one underlying cause is the constitutionally mandated redistricting process as it is conducted in most states these days.

In far too many states the two parties have engaged in an unholy alliance to protect their incumbents and avoid the rigors of political contest. In others, the dominance of one political party has been so overwhelming that they have written the rules to assure that this domination continues by packing all adherents of the opposition party into the fewest possible districts – no matter how egregious the gerrymandering required to do so.

Consistently, now, in the general election, well over 90% of Congressional races in this country are virtually uncontested. The absence of contest has contributed to the increasing absence of voters. With a pre-ordained outcome, why bother?

The impact on civility and civil discourse, on constructive debate and comity, is even more pernicious. The pattern of redistricting as it has now evolved leads to such a result.

If a candidate needs only to talk to those who are most fervent in support of the philosophy of his or her chosen political organization, they don't have to listen to, or even speak to, people in the center, much less those of the other party. As a matter of fact, if they are seen cozying up too much to people on the other side of the political aisle, they might put their own Primary prospect at risk in the next election.

The result is that we're increasingly moving to a political system that looks, and feels, like a political barbell: one where all the weight is at either end of the spectrum, leaving those in the center with little voice or opportunity for impact.

It's dangerous, it's counterproductive, and I think it represents an assault upon the Constitutional premise of balance which has so graced the first two centuries of this republic.

There is an alternative. One state has chosen a better route. In Iowa, the districting is done by an independent commission, and, as I understand it, the rules are fairly straight forward. They seek to draw district lines that are compact and contiguous, both happily appropriate constitutional

terms, and to the extent possible, ones that adhere to county lines. All this without regard to party. The result – most contests in Iowa are contests. Many would argue that the Iowa delegation has been consistently one of the best in Congress, one whose Members seek solutions which often require the participation of partisans from both sides of the political aisle. Not a bad result.

Well, that is but one suggestion. Lest we get too blue over all this I need to emphasize that in my experience, the great majority of Members of Congress are overwhelmingly competent, caring, honorable and decent public servants. One has only to look at their schedules to know they are extremely hard working. Yet they are working within a system that too often makes it risky, if not downright dangerous, to reach across party lines to try to solve national problems. So perhaps thinking about trying the Iowa Plan elsewhere is worth considering. Other efforts need to compliment this long term possibility.

A very distinguished Chattanooga and a very dear friend of mine, David Abshire, has started a group in Washington, to promote the cause of civility in our nations' capital. He's written an essay on deepening the American dream. It's called the Grace and Power of Civility, and I want to read to you just a couple of sentences because David is so wonderfully articulate in this area. He is describing what he calls "another force" that has seen America through some of its most difficult challenges, and he goes on to say:

It is the interaction of these forces of commitment and tolerance, of passion and civility that has been the hallmark of the American experience. Indeed, while commitment without tolerance produces a sort of zealous destructive fundamentalism, tolerance without commitment entails a moral reserve that can degenerate into moral vacuity or paralysis.

It must be clear that tolerance is not the surrender of conviction. Tolerance does not require one to sacrifice personal ideals or water down beliefs to a toothless least common denominator. As Michael Novak points out, to be tolerant is by no means the same thing as to believe that any proposition is as true as any other. Our Constitution does not reduce tolerance to some form of moral equivalence to degrade the truth of things. At its best, tolerance promotes a marketplace of ideas where its diverse viewpoints collide to create a higher level of understanding.

There's an interesting article in *The Washington Post* that talked about the Reverend Rob Shank, an Evangelical Christian, a local leader of the religious right, and Rabbi David Saperstein, a reformed Jew and local leader of the religious left. Both of these men led political advocacy groups in Washington and they had battled for years over abortion, gay rights, stem cell research, and school prayer. The article notes that this summer each intends to preach a bit of the other's usual message, and I'm just going to quote the article.

Shank says that he "plans to tell young Evangelicals at a Christian Music Festival on July first that homosexuality is not a choice, but a predisposition, something deeply rooted in many people. That might not sound shocking to you, but it will be shocking to my audience," he said. Saperstein said that he is circulating a paper urging political moderates and liberals "to demonstrate their commitment to reduce abortions" by starting a campaign to reduce the number by half within three years. They're not working together. The minister remains a diehard opponent of same sex marriage, the rabbi staunchly supports a woman's constitutional right to choose an abortion, but both are trying to find common ground between liberals and conservatives on moral issues, and they are not alone.

Well, halleluiah. I am sick to death of the absolutists on both sides, saying that they have some magic right to discern absolute truth. The problems with this country are far too serious for us to spend all of our time throwing bricks across the backyard fence at each other and not even having the courtesy of listening to the other side.

David's book quotes Benjamin Franklin at the conclusion of the writing of the new Constitution. The debate had been hot and heavy. There were deep feelings on all sides, and many were expressing strong reservations about signing it. In calling for ratification, he said, "On the whole, Sir, I cannot help expressing the wish that every Member of the Convention who may still have objections to it would, with me on this occasion, doubt a little of his own infallibility, and make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument."

Were we to doubt a little of our own infallibility, perhaps we might find it within us to listen or to give a little more care to other's viewpoints, those that differ from ours, but who care just as much, believe just as firmly and fervently in their cause as we do ours, and see if there is not between us the gift of a solution.

My life experience has taught me many things. Some of the lessons were accomplished by a good deal of pain. But in the final analysis, I have found that people whose conclusions often differ markedly from my own, can be, and usually are, just as caring, just as patriotic, just as interested in their friends and community as I am. And if I will just seek to understand how they reached their conclusions, it will, in a very nice and important way help to inform, and perhaps even improve, my own.

One last point, and that pertains to every one of us. Most of us go about our lives without seeing many of those around us – the supermarket cashier, the kid taking our movie tickets, the parking lot attendant. Are they invisible to you, as they sometimes are to me? I wonder if we can't speak, and look them in the eye for a response – just to recognize their importance. Sometimes little things like this begin to add up to a more civil world too.

In sum, the people I like to be around are people who care enough to be engaged, who believe good manners and civil discourse are essential components of a civil society, and who understand that listening is a mark of respect, not weakness. That lesson has enriched my life. Given the challenges we face these days, both foreign and domestic, it is a lesson we ignore at our own collective peril.