

Interview with Senator Paul E. Tsongas

MRY: Senator, how do you define liberalism? What do you regard as its enduring values?

PT: I tried to sit down a few months ago and ask myself what are the liberal values. We often talk about liberal values in a kind of generic sense, but when you actually sit down and enumerate them it becomes very difficult. I've come to feel that there are basically five. One is economic justice. A second is social justice. A third is political justice. Basically all three ~~derive from~~ ^{involve} the individual and the ~~capacity of that individual to be treated fairly.~~ ^{fair treatment} In terms of political justice, obviously the matter of every person having the ~~capacity to~~ ^{right} vote is an enduring concern. In terms of social justice, the whole ~~racial dilemma~~ ^{Civil Rights movement} in the United States is an example. And in the case of economic justice, the ~~distributive effects of the tax system~~ ^{progressive} is an example. ^{respect for}

The fourth value, ~~for lack of a better term,~~ ^{concern for the} is the environment - the sense of the environment as a self-contained unit that requires some affection and concern about what one does to it. The ~~last,~~ ^{is} what I refer to as ~~the family of man approach.~~ That a child is dying right now in Somalia should be of concern to us. A la ^{into the budget} Jessie Helms, we shouldn't put money ~~in~~ ^{into the budget} for child nutrition in the United States by taking it out of food programs for Somalia. [italia]

MRY: That's an imposing set. As you state those values, it seems that few would not be able to identify with them. What is it that has changed so that these values apparently are not as mainstream as they were, say, in the 1960s?

Well, on the contrary, the conservatives would argue that they adhere to exactly the same values. They're very much motherhood and apple pie kinds of things. The difference comes in implementation,

in making choices among various policies. I spoke to a group this afternoon and used two examples: One concerned apartheid in South Africa; ~~where in our decision these days to maintain a~~ ^(closer) relationship with South Africa flies in the face of all three justice criteria - economic, political, and social. So, in that sense, yes, the conservatives adhere to that but as a secondary issue.

The other example concerned tax policy. When you have a tax policy that endorses Kemp-Roth, which is in essence a tax policy or tax cut geared to the wealthiest people, then you obviously do not consider economic justice to be that serious a value. So the question becomes not do we all adhere to these values - we all do theoretically - but do we do it when we actually have choices to make among various policies.

MRY: Do we, then, read recent events as a retrenchment from the primacy of these values? ~~at national policy making levels?~~

Well that's the great question - whether or not we have adopted a kind of devil-take-the-hindmost attitude. We don't know that yet. Clearly, the average person has ^{seen many abuses of our system} ~~spent a lot of time during the last decade, observing abuses of our system.~~ And when you observe the abuses you tend to be less sympathetic to the underlying values that you serve. If you're in a supermarket and the person in front of you is buying food with food stamps and you can't make it through without food stamps, you tend to become hostile to whatever system set up that food stamp program. Now does that translate into abandonment of the value? I don't think so, but clearly these next four years will test that. Do we have a socially and societally embraced notion of a real safety net, not just David Stockman's safety net? Well we don't know that. We're sure as hell going to find out.

MRY: What do liberals do in the meantime? You have been, as you called yourself, a point-man pursuing a redefinition of the liberal agenda. Where is your thinking now in terms of the basic substance of that agenda?

Well, I think ~~if there is one point that I make it would be that~~ ^{emphasize} when you put together a political approach, ~~that you~~ ^{must} do it with ~~an~~ ^{an} eye toward actually convincing people to go with you. A political philosophy should not be a ~~recanting~~ ^{recounting} of past dogma. The problem with liberalism, in many ways, has been its success. The key question is whether we in essence fashion a philosophy that is ^{as} ^g relevant to the 1980s and 1990s or simply rely upon what we used to have.

I've used an analogy that may ~~not be~~ ^{a little obscure,} very relevant. Do you happen to remember Dick Radatz?

MRY: Sure, the one-time fire-baller for the Red Sox.

There you go. He had one pitch. It was a fastball. He was very good for a reasonable period of time. But ~~once~~ he lost the fastball he was gone. Well, liberals had the New Deal/Great Society fastball and once that began to get clobbered they had nothing else to rely ~~upon~~.

What I'm saying is that if you don't have a political platform that is, above all, perceived to be workable, you will be replaced by someone who embraces a different set of values. So above all we must be relevant ^g and realistic and within that program embrace the liberal tradition.

Now this suggests the abandonment of some traditional liberal programs. I'll give you an example. Anti-trust is about as much a foundation of liberalism as anything. But in a situation where we have not an intra- U.S. economy, but an international^gly competitive one, there

are now instances where you want cooperation among major companies. This was once referred to as collusion. In other words, the world environment has changed, and we have to change with it. An approach that worked back in the 1930s won't necessarily work today.

This kind of change, I recognize, is very difficult. I, for example, support the decontrol of oil because I think the world requires that we have oil priced at its replacement cost. That's tough for a liberal to swallow. But these kinds of changes, I think, are necessary if we are going to succeed. Now you can put together a liberal program that will always be a minority program and in essence become a permanent opposition. That has no appeal to me.

MRY: What you are talking about is far more than some changes in marketing or packaging. You're talking about basic shifts in some positions that have been central to the liberal agenda.

Some of them. It's interesting. One person read the galleys of my book and dismissed it as traditional liberalism. I was very encouraged by that, because everyone else has been taking potshots at me for abandoning liberalism.

MRY: Let me focus on the sphere of domestic policies and programs, such as those in the human services area, and try to get your feeling for how you think liberals should respond to some of the notions that conservatives have brought to the fore these days - for instance, the notion that government and society are suffering from structural overload, from a series of entitlements and expectations that government just can't fulfill. The follow-up to this criticism is that it's time for some fundamental re-examination of what government can do in the first place.

PT. — I have no problem with that.

MRY: The argument, then, should be taken seriously?

I think it deserves examination. But I don't think you define policy prior to the examination, which is what they are arguing for. There's no question that a society that is becoming increasingly dependent upon government for survival is a less functional society. Government by definition is nameless, faceless, an amorphous provider of services. It's simply not as human scale as service provided by private agencies.

MRY: Do you have a sense that we are ^cclose to a danger point in that regard?

I guess you could ask: what is the danger point? But there clearly are problems. Look at CETA (the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act). ^{Under} the public service component of CETA, the ideal was to provide jobs for those needing them. It became a patronage avenue for political reasons. The average person came to realize that ^{which} ~~and that~~ built up a back ^{lash}. It contributed to a reactionary tide that can wipe out everything, good and bad. So whether you're talking about ^{the} Headstart program or ~~a~~ CETA, they both get hurt. ~~And yet you~~ ^{One} can argue, very strongly I think, for the Headstart program. But I would not argue for CETA.

It is important to remember that in government you never have the same discipline as you have in the private sector. Government supervisors don't really take it all that seriously compared to private sector supervisors. I ^{was elected Commissioner} ran in Middlesex County (Massachusetts) ^{t/} on a reform slate in 1972, and I really learned my lesson there about the idea

of public money being nobody's money. There's no accountability. I think it's simply part of the system. You can't get away from a good part of it because if government doesn't do it, it doesn't get done. But to believe that government is the "be all and end all" is as absurd as to think that the private sector can somehow solve all problems.

MRY: Peter Drucker said that government should do less and guide more. How's that for a liberal credo for the 1980s?

Sounds wonderful.

MRY: I presume you feel that liberals should not be content to expect less of government around the five areas that you talked about.

The major international competitor we have is Japan. Japan is a classic example of government~~al~~ activism. And here we are in this country, saying that the way to solve our economic problems is to get government off our back^s, when the major thriving economy in the world takes just the opposite approach. The private sector has a notoriously limited horizon. The government is ^{inherently} ~~by definition~~ inefficient. The question is how do you mix them. Government provides a longer view; the private sector provides the more productive environment.

MRY: How do you react to the notion that the federal government has become too powerful at the expense of the states and that, be it in the form of block grants or whatever, that there should be more responsibility lodged with state government?

That view is based more on theory than on experience.
~~It's the states' rights, theoretician's argument.~~ Let's take the

city renewal issue. The best program addressing urban revitalization is the Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) program. It has federal strings like no other program in that area, very weighted down with regulation. It works because there are guidelines. CETA was the least encumbered. So the argument that if you give it all to the local people, you'll have less abuse isn't true at all. Having served in local government, I can tell you that the tendency of the local government is to survive politically. To the extent that you provide a block grant program, you increase the amount of political pressure on decision making. I can accept the argument for less regulation, because there is too much of a tendency ^{for} of regulators to cover their tails by over-regulating. But the idea that you can create efficiencies the further down you go flies in the face of a lot of experience.

MRY: How about state government? A central part of the argument put forth by the conservatives is that it is not local government, but rather state government ^{that} we need to put more in charge. It is state government that is stressed in the Constitution and that is the key to our federal system.

Well, if one believes that you can have ⁵⁰ fifty state governments that are effective and efficient, that's fine. But it is not the case. ~~mean~~ you have great variations in abuse and corruption, ^{and} inefficiencies ~~in~~ management levels. You basically pay your money and take your chances when you bring it down to the state level.

MRY: Any more so than you would at the local level?

No. I would be more likely to take my chances at the state level than the local level.

You are far more likely to have a concentration of technically trained people at the state level. Basically, management is what you are looking for, management skills. And there's no evidence that there are more management skills available at the local level or state level than there are at the federal level. The question is, given a particular program, what makes the most sense in terms of implementation. ~~You had the Welfare program administered by local communities. It was taken away because it was considered to be inefficient.~~

MPY: Another popular notion of the day is competition. Competition, it is argued, should be a more central feature in the delivery of publicly funded services, such as health care for instance. How should liberals view that?

Again, on its face, no one should have trouble with that. What happens if you say - here's a hundred dollars, go out and find yourself a proper dentist. A person takes the hundred ⁵dollars and buys himself a fan because it is 96 degrees out. That's competition. Is that better health care service?

/ So I think that the argument that the individual is better off having the money as opposed to having those services provided cuts both ways. In that situation, it's really one of priorities. Does the person consider going to the dentist today as opposed to six months from now a priority item? Do you by providing preventive health care measures accelerate the ^{e, ik}likelihood of the person being taken care of and in so doing will you save money down the road? People are not preventive ^{ion -}oriented. They're basically crisis-oriented. All of us are.

Here's an example of the horizon problem, where government does have a role to play.

MRY: I've touched a few of the areas that are part of the conservative mainstream today. Looking at the ideas that conservatives have put on the national agenda, what strikes you as the weakest flank - as areas that you feel warrant hard criticism?

What disturbs me the most is the hypocrisy of conservatives who argue for less government spending and then support tobacco subsidies. That kind of rhetoric suggests that what they're into is not any kind of philosophical consistency but rather simply playing the political game of what brings crowds to their feet. It seems to me that the toughest argument to deal with is the argument of those who don't need services arguing that we can't afford to provide them for those who do. It's like the person saying: let's have a voluntary Social Security system because I can invest enough money to get myself through. I don't need it. But then if you have a stroke at the age of 34 and you've got a wife and two kids, you change your mind immediately.

So we have a lack of social responsibility, not caused by anything ~~else~~ ^{other} than a sense of crisis, of economic decline. With that perspective we'll all sink together. In that situation people tend to be much more Darwinian in their attitudes. That's what the conservatives are basically playing on.

MRY: I'd like to talk a little about the workings of Congress. It seems to me that one of the byproducts of the liberal era has been the increased specialization and bureaucratization of the Congress itself.

Should this be a cause of much concern? Does it, as a lot of critics charge, make it all but impossible to expect any kind of coherent policy leadership by Congress?

Are you talking about staff expansion?

MRY: I'm talking about the strengthening of the specialized parts at the expense of the more generalist parts that seek to generate consensus. As programs have multiplied, as staffs have increased, it seems to have become much more difficult for Congress to guide, to steer.

That's true, but if you multiply the number of programs, you have to specialize to be conversant. We do a lot of work in our various fields because we've got to be specialized in particular fields; in that sense we provide leadership. The generalist on the Hill will get obliterated by the specialist every time. So, which comes first, the chicken or the egg? Did the breakdown into specialties take place first or did the programs come first which then required people to be knowledgeable about them?

On the House side, I had a generalist approach. My staffers were hired because they were generalists who could pick up a number of areas. Here it's just the opposite. I hired specialists in their fields. We're much more efficient here. We're much more productive and much more professional than we were on the House side.

MRY: In terms of the quality of the decision making in, say, the Senate as a whole, then, you don't see it harmed in any way by the weakening of the centripetal forces, such as party caucuses?

I think the quality of the decision making in both bodies is a reflection of the people who are elected, not the system that's been set up.

MRY: You wouldn't, then, especially as an independent^d-~~mined~~ Senator, go along with the calls for much tighter party discipline.

I'm one that does not believe in structural^u solutions to policy problems. Party discipline in the 1960s called for Democrats to unite behind Lyndon Johnson to support the war in Vietnam. What did that do for us? Party discipline is a marvelous idea if you're part of the majority. If you happen to be a dissenter, it's not much fun. It depends on whose ox is being gored at a particular time.

MRY: I suppose another way of looking at this kind of thing is to view the fragmentation of ideas and approaches in Congress as being reflective of the tremendous diversity out there in the country as a whole. Where does that leave you? One could argue that the fundamental need today is for national initiatives that aim to break down some of the divisions in the country. I know that you've argued in the past for a national youth services corp, something I imagine that most liberal^swould be opposed to.

The other day ~~A~~ European said to me: "You know, The U.S. isn't a country. It's a continent." I thought that was a remarkable insight. We're such a disparate group. I thought that national service would be one way of giving young people a sense of the need for devotion to a larger entity, in this case the nation. And I would see nothing inherently unattractive about that for liberals.

We tend to fly off in our own sort of centrifugal ways. I've been traveling a lot around the country and am always shocked at how different people are in this country. You really ponder whether it's possible for anybody to put ~~the~~^a package together so that a reasonable majority of people march in the same direction that is positive, not simply an "anti-direction" (which is easy to put together).

MRY: Have you received much support for the youth service corps idea?

(a study commission on it)

We got ~~it~~ through the Senate last year, but ~~it~~^{that} died in the House.

Some

Liberals are concerned that it's the back door to the draft.

MRY: Plus a more intrusive federal role over individuals than they would be comfortable with.

The Peace Corps was a vintage liberal idea.

MRY: But your notion was for required service, wasn't it?

No, it was a voluntary thing. I was picketed once on the issue - the first and only time I have been picketed in my life. ~~It~~^{National service} was referred to as Hitler-like.

Should be I

MRY: Who did the picketing?

Some students at Brandeis.

MRY: You have described yourself as a point^Jman.

Yes, a blunted point^Jman.

MRY: How do you respond to liberals who would charge that your quest for a redefinition is basically counter-productive in that at a time when there is a great conservative onslaught, all energies should be put into manning the barricades so to speak and defending those programs that are in great peril. There's a great fear, particularly among those working in the human services field. Many are interested in exploring new ideas and approaches, but when it comes to the use of their own time they feel that the priority has to be given to defending what is in place.

It's like seeing ~~someone who went through a campaign to encourage~~^{from} women ~~to undertake~~^{ing} self examination for breast cancer. I guess the argument you just used is that one should not probe for unhappy realities. ~~You'd~~^{One would} be a lot better off pretending they're not there and going about business as usual. I think in the long term you're far better off facing the realities that are ~~out~~ there, adjusting to the, and coming up with a viable package than in engaging in this kind of hopeless, almost fetal position approach in which you just pretend that you're not having difficulties. Politicians ^{in that posture} ~~that do that~~ end up unemployed, ~~and the same~~

People argue with me = My God, you've turned your back on FDP. And I say, ^{well} go back and read FDR's campaign rhetoric sometime. What he said in his campaign and what he did when he got in are two entirely different things. And the reason was he had enough sense to evolve. If

he had not evolved he would have been another Herbert Hoover. The fact is that his capacity to take the world as it existed and deal with it constructively and hopefully with some innovative thinking was what made him what he was. To argue that in time of difficulty we should ~~retrench back to~~ ^{dig in around} those approaches that put us in the difficulty ^t in the first place is unwise. I can understand why people might feel that way, but don't argue with me that it will work.

MRY: Your speech to the Americans for Democratic Action was about a year or so ago, wasn't it?

Yes, almost exactly.

The speech has endured rather well. Maybe I wasn't so wrong after all. The book that I'm writing is basically that speech writ large. You know it's interesting because the term "new liberalism" comes out of that ^s speech. I had not realize ^d that. In fact, I was going around being critical of those who used the term. Then one day recently I took a look at the speech and sure enough I saw the references to the "new liberalism".

MRY: Do you find that in the course of the past year there has been a greater readiness among liberals to engage in a redefinition?

Oh yes. As someone who used to be taken pillar to post, I now get invited to expound on my views. There's a difference between being whipped and being questioned, having experienced both.

MRY: It's not quite as lonely on the point as it was a year ago.

What's happened is that the election shook liberals' confidence badly. What you have now is a unique intellectual window that can be exploited. The danger is that if Ronald Reagan begins to slide, that window will close. If that happens and we go back to what we used to be, we're just going to repeat the same thing all over again.

It's a fascinating time to be around here. It will be interesting to see how the book sells. If the book dies on the vine, that window closed or else the book wasn't good. I think it will be one indication of how much interest there is in a redefinition of the liberal agenda.

MRY: I would like to finish up on a more personal note. I have heard you say that to feel good about yourself in this environment, you have to be willing to give it all up, that you have to operate on that basis.

That's right.

MRY: I wonder. As you gain stature, as you get closer to re-election time, doesn't it get harder to keep that frame of mind?

Niki and I ^{greater}
~~We~~ have a much ~~more~~ fervent desire to ~~quit and~~ go back home now than we ever did. I find that the closer I get to what I want to do, the more other things begin to be important to me. I had dinner last night with another young Senator and we spent three ^{quarters} of the time talking about how nice it would be to go back - him to his state and me to my state - and how much we both dislike Washington. If you could have this life in Massachusetts or for him ~~some~~^W ~~where~~ else, it would be fine.

MRY: What is it that's so bad about Washington?

The transitory nature of relationships - the feeling of not being part of it, that you're a title, ~~not a name,~~ not a person. I don't mean that in a perjorative sense, but that's just the way the company town operates. As he said, he could go back to his hometown and they would care less whether or not he was a Senator. He said they always thought he was an aberration anyway. They liked him or disliked him for what he was.

I've met enough people around here who would be unemployable if they were not in Congress. ⁵⁵ I just don't respect that. They're afraid to give it all up.

MRY: ~~You're giving a good back-door argument for block grants.~~ If there were more responsibility and more authority at the state level, people such as yourself could have positions of broad scope serving in state legislatures. There would be more action on the home front.

I ~~don't~~ think government is something you should get into, serve for awhile, go as far as you can, but not spend ³⁰ ~~thirty~~ years at it.

MRY: That's something that you and the President agree on.

Let me see. I can quit after this term, spend a quarter of a century in the private sector and run for President and I'll still be younger than Ronald Reagan is now.

MRY: That's a good note to end on.

Want to play softball?