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A Tea Party Environmental Platform

By David Schnare

5/13/2010 -- Middle America has awakened and their slogan appears to be “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.” At least, that seems to be the meaning of the Tea Party movement and the recent elections in Massachusetts, New Jersey and Virginia. And there is nothing at this point to suggest that the Tea Party folks are going away anytime soon. Their concerns about government spending, government regulations and government arrogance seem to have caught the imagination of a large plurality of voters.

As such, one might ask what the Tea Party thinks about the environment and what it should think about the environment. They aren’t exactly the same thing.

To begin with, there is no “Tea Party”. That is to say, the Tea Party movement is more a movement than a political party; and that’s the way they want it. This “party” may support some candidates, and conservative candidates will claim they have Tea Party endorsement, but you will not find any candidates registered as representing the Tea Party, as opposed to running as a Republican or an Independent.

Nevertheless, if anyone has a bona fide national platform that is more than mere window dressing, it would be the Tea Party.

So, what is the Tea Party about and what does that really mean with regard to environmentalism. That question has been little addressed and where it has, it has been shallow.

The Tea Parties – and that’s the point, there are lots of them – The Tea Parties generally adopt a very simple overall platform: Fiscal Responsibility, Constitutionally Limited Government and Free Markets.

Based on these Tea Party principles, one ought to be able to find a fiscally conservative, small government plank about the environment, but they don’t jump out from your Google search page. Indeed, a Google search on “tea party environmental” produced over 21 million hits, but in the first 1,000, only one Tea Party emerged as having an environmental plank, the North Idaho Tea Party. Theirs reflect the movement and is not a nuanced embrace of the core principals.

In brief, the North Idaho Tea Party’s Environmental Committee “believes that nature should not be elevated above human and property rights, and supports a balanced approach

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between preserving the natural world and protecting the living needs of the people.” [You can read their approach here.](#) In essence, this has a Not-in-my-back-yard (NIMBY) flavor along with a sense that they don’t agree with the policy choices coming out of Washington.

If this is where the Tea Parties are, then where should they be?

A Principled Tea Party Environmental Policy

The North Idaho environmental plank strikes me as part of the Tea Party equation, but created more out of the wonk press rather than constructed directly from the fundamental principles at issue. Let’s fill in that blank, taking each core principle in turn, beginning with constitutionally limited government.

Limited Government

The environmental movement draws its power from the federal authority to control interstate commerce. Sounds boring, but this is the basis for controlling pollution. Without question, environmental laws have stretched the commerce clause to beyond its cognizable bounds. A Tea Party environmental agenda must include pulling the federal government back into a reasonable relationship to the concept of interstate commerce. A stream that flows only within a state should not be subject to anything but state environmental controls. If someone wants to cross a state border to fish or swim in that stream, they bring with them revenue potential to the state. The state has all the tools it needs to balance the value of that interstate commerce against the cost of varying water quality. In many ways, regional air quality that does not affect down wind states is a similar non-interstate commerce issue that states can address as they best see fit. Even where there is an interstate impact, bordering state have all the tools they need to negotiate appropriate controls without having to suffer the over-inclusive regulatory culture of a federal bureaucracy captured by single-issue driven environmental activists.

Keep in mind, this is not the 1960’s, when America was reaping the profit and suffering the consequences of the massive reinvestment in industry that grew out of the second world war. Today the science of environmental management and the desire for good environmental quality has become a part of the nation’s cultural fabric. The Tea Parties stand for the presumption that local government is much more likely to bring balance to environmental decision-making than the federal bureaucracy, as discussed further below. The key point remains – the federal role needs to be properly limited under the Constitution, allowing the State to reassume their fundamental role in determining the level of environmental quality they want.

Fiscal Responsibility

Folks who march and meet at Tea Party events routinely argue that if bureaucrats had to make budget decisions in the same way families do, we would have a very different budget and a far greater reliance on personal responsibility. Underneath this sentiment is a fundamental economic principle labeled “opportunity costs.” Every person who has to spend their own money understands this concept. A dollar spent on gasoline is a dollar that cannot be spent on

food, clothing and housing, much less the non-essentials that so many consider necessary to living the American dream.

Believe it or not, regulators NEVER have to take opportunity costs into account when establishing environmental quality goals. About the most the federal rules require, and then only in some cases, is that mandated pollution controls be “affordable.” All that means is that the government is making your choices for you. If you have money to spend, they will make you spend it on pollution control, even if that final little bit of pollution control is not worth one red cent.

The environmental activists have destroyed the entire principle of fiscal responsibility and have erased the concept of opportunity costs by demanding a zero risk environment. Americans, however, are happy to accept a modicum of risk if it allows them the opportunity to reap other rewards. That is why, when asked as to list the most important issues facing the nation, the environment is always at the bottom of the list. Americans believe we are doing enough to save the planet within the budget we already have – and perhaps are spending more on environmental quality than we should.

Free Markets

The Tea Party movement makes a great deal of noise about private property rights, and they should. While there are some private property rights issues associated with natural resources, there is also a robust literature on this. I leave the interested reader to scour that literature at their leisure. You will find a basic reading list here. http://commonsblog.org/free_reading.php In essence, free-market environmentalism basically argues that private property rights and the marketplace, if not obstructed by big government, can do better than big government can do to protect the environment.

There is another element to private markets and environmentalism, however, that demands attention. An efficient market place requires transparency about the market, and this is especially true in the market place of policy options. In common words, it is not possible to obtain sensible environmentalism without honest science, including full transparency in the scientific discussion.

There is no better example today than the eastern establishment elite’s approach to global warming. They presume “the science is settled” and that there is a greater than 90 percent probability that humanity will suffer cataclysmic destruction due to human-induced greenhouse gas emissions. The list of world famous climatologists that reject these two presumptuous statements is both long and not long enough to stop the impending climate change train wreck proposed federal and state regulation will cause.

Tea Parties are scathingly and properly scathingly opposed to the climate change proposals that have emerged over the past decade. They see the economic consequences of such action, and applying the principles of “opportunity costs” and the need for honest science, including full transparency in the scientific discussion.

And One Thing More - Leadership

Even with this principled policy in place, the Tea Parties demand one thing more, even if they haven't made much noise about it on the environmental front.

They want officials who have the courage to look Big Green in the eye and say, "No you can't". They want officials who will not only contemplate a rebalancing of the needs of the society as against the demands of Big Green, but will make the budget cuts that result in a rebalancing. They want officials who demonstrate fiscal responsibility on environmental management.

In short, the Tea Parties want as much environmental quality as we can afford, but no more than we can afford, and they want leaders committed to taking the hard steps to reign in environmental extremism.

Let's put this last point in perspective, harkening back to the concept of opportunity costs. The government is headed toward bankruptcy of its social security, Medicare and Medicaid programs, to name just three. If we are ever going to find a way to make them solvent, it will take more than simply cutting back on those programs alone (regardless of how you feel about taxes). Other programs will have to suffer cuts as well.

The Tea Parties want leadership willing to cut the less important programs, and there are many within the environmental portfolio. Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey has openly challenged the no-growth or limited-growth environmentalists in his state.. He has demonstrated environmental leadership by displaying fiscal responsibility, respect for constitutionally limited government and reliance on free markets and sound science. Other governors faced with huge spending deficits should take a look at what Christie did to bring his budget under control. If they do, they will exhibit principled Tea Party Environmental Leadership – an approach that maintains core environmental programs while reducing or eliminating those that cost more than anyone can justify through honest science.

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