Broken Washington: It’s Not You, It’s Me

By Lieutenant Governor Spencer J. Cox

“Washington is broken.” It’s a common refrain and, frankly, an easy target. With debt spiraling out of control, a disastrous Republican-led government shutdown, and the discouraging rollout of the Democrats’ signature healthcare law—DC deserves the criticism.

At the heart of this dysfunction is a deeply divided Congress. And while we have seen radical polarization before, this time something seems different. Consider this shocking chart (Cillizza, 2013):

The political middle has disappeared.

And what about the Senate? Hyper-partisanship abounds there too. A recent study performed by researchers from Duke and UNC concluded that, “We have not seen the current level of partisanship since the early 1900s” (U.S. Political Polarization, 2013).

Experts from Harvard and Princeton have recently posited and proven that groups of people with diverse backgrounds can find the most efficient solutions to complex problems faster than like-minded groups (Mele, 2013). They suggest that groups with diverse backgrounds can find the most efficient solutions to complex problems faster than like-minded groups.

There have been many attempts to explain this behavior. Gerrymandered districts (Gerard, 2013), the rise of outrage as media (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014), and the “radical connectivity” of “news” sources that allow voters to reinforce their world view without ever listening to an opposing idea (Mele, 2013) are clearly contributing to the problem. I believe, however, that there is something deeper and more dangerous at play. I believe the answer lies in a much simpler attribute—or, more correctly, the loss of an attribute: humility.

From town halls to the halls of Congress, we increasingly see and hear a shrill rightness. Instead of a religious people involved in politics, politics is becoming a religion. Once this transition takes place, anyone that opposes us is not only wrong, but evil. This leads to a place where collaboration and compromise are called collusion, and principle is more important than people. We become a nation where being opinionated is confused with being informed. Ultimately, we are surrounded by self-proclaimed Constitutional scholars who have no understanding of the concepts of collaboration and compromise embedded in that document.

Having thus painted ourselves into corners with vociferous pronouncements of absolutes, full of the accompanying hubris and dogma, we can never change our hearts or minds. Even worse, we cynically brand and crucify politicians who do so with the scarlet letter “F”: flip-flopper. In so doing, we lose sight of the humility suggested by the venerable Judge Learned Hand who, quoting Sir Oliver Cromwell, said, “I beseech ye in the bowels of Christ, think ye may be mistaken.” I should like to have that written over the portals of every church, every school, and every court house, and, may I say, of every legislative body in the United States” (Learned Hand Testimony, 1951).

This begs the question, what can we do? Unfortunately, it has been said—and I agree—that as a people we get the governance we deserve. As such, it stands to reason that we must start by looking into our own hearts and change our own lives. We can begin by choosing to forego “outrage media.” The next time our favorite commentator is calling someone names or our cable news network features two talking (screaming) heads, simply change the channel.

Next, we need to learn to listen to those with whom we disagree. A few weeks ago I had an incredible opportunity to meet with 24 young political leaders from across the country: 12 Republicans and 12 Democrats. As we discussed leadership principles and the history of democratic thought, we were given a challenge to check our partisanship at the door and actually listen in a different way. It seems simple, but the experience was actually uncomfortable and a little jarring at first. It was at that moment I understood an additional piece of wisdom by Judge Learned Hand, “The spirit
of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women” (Learned Hand Testimony, 1944).

Finally, if we are ever to change the course of division and dysfunction in DC, we must elect men and women that will stop bloodying and bullying each other on the pulpit of principle and start treating one another with courtesy and respect. Senator Alan Simpson put it bluntly: “If you are a legislator and you can’t learn to compromise an issue without compromising yourself, get out of the business. In fact, don’t ever get married, either. You don’t want any part of that” (Baraback, 2013).

If we are to fix Washington and turn the tide of partisan divide, we must expect more of our elected officials. We must also expect more of ourselves. "With malice toward none; with charity for all” (Lincoln, 1865). We must remember that “[w]e are not enemies, but friends…. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection” (Lincoln, 1861). Only then can we, in the words of the great philosopher, Vanilla Ice (1990), who said it best: "Stop, collaborate, and listen."

REFERENCES


