

“No More Politics As Usual”

Whatever your views of his policy positions, anyone who talks with Tom Horner will agree that he is an exceptionally thoughtful, smart and serious person. He was Senator Dave Durenberger’s director of communications and then chief of staff in the 70’s and 80’s – a Republican Senator who would be branded by today’s Minnesota Republican Party as a socialist, or worse. When Durenberger left office, Horner started a very successful public relations firm, with a focus on public service and public policy clients. Then in 2010 he ran for Governor of Minnesota as an Independent Party candidate.

In their ringing endorsement of his candidacy, published a week earlier than usual, explicitly to encourage voters to overcome their doubts about supporting a third-party candidate, the Minneapolis Star Tribune said Horner “evokes something fundamental to Minnesota’s 152 year success story, something that has been eroding in recent years – a sense that (we’re) all in this together.” While the editorial, and Horner’s campaign, talked explicitly about the damage done by extreme partisan divisiveness, neither used any general negative phrases about “politics as usual.”

Here’s how Horner explained to me the roots of our current political crisis, as I remember it from a hallway conversation a couple of years ago: “Every two years, people make a lot of money making or selling political advertising. It’s a huge business, every two years. And those ads all say variations of the same thing: the opposition is not to be trusted; the people in office are corrupt, incompetent, selfish, unfair; the political system is broken. Every two years. And you know what? Advertising works.”

The result is, our self-governing republic is composed mostly of people who do not believe in politics, who deeply distrust government, who think democracy doesn’t work.

This is the deep political crisis we’re in. It was weakening our country long before the current players arrived on the scene – in fact, it made their current positions possible – and it will be with us still in 2014, 2016, 2020 maybe. How and when we get out of it will depend, in part, on how those of us who do believe in democracy act on that belief, and how we talk to our neighbors.

So I’m distressed when I hear politicians say “No more politics as usual.” Especially when I hear it from the political left. First of all, I don’t know what they mean by this, and sadly, neither do they.

The politics we have right now is anything but “usual”. From the Tea Party to Occupy, from George Bush to Barack Obama, from the amounts of money to the timelines to the numbers of

targeted media messages to the vast online echo chamber, our political climate and culture, however you want to characterize it, can no way be honestly called the usual, same old thing.

Oh sure, there is, still, corruption, scandal and deceit. There's still name-calling and blame-shifting. There are, always, abuses of power and failures of courage. As there have been, throughout the history of the Republic. I guess that's the "usual". Does "No more!" mean they're going to abolish those evils for good and ever? Well, good luck with that. It's not just in America, and not just for the past couple hundred years, that these have been constant features of politics and power. The object, whether it's overthrowing a king or electing a congress, is to determine how to allocate resources and power – who gets what, and who gets to say? Because of our system of government, we've made a lot of progress, taking the long view. Not doing so well lately.

When progressive politicians say "no more politics as usual", I think what they mean to say is, they are ready to fight against corruption and abuse; they want to serve the needs and aspirations of the community as a whole, not of narrow self-interests. If that's what they mean, then that's what they should say. And name the abuses and who benefits, name those whose narrow interests oppose the public interest.

Lose the slogan "no more politics as usual" and all its negative variants. It won't work to energize young people and those who are disengaged, to become involved in the decidedly unromantic work of politics – learning about the issues, going to meetings, getting signatures, going to the polls: all those things are politics as usual.

The people who are already politically active will be there already, and will loudly applaud this ringing slogan. From across the political spectrum, many of them believe that they are working toward a fundamental transformation of the political system, and in any case that what they're doing right now is a very big deal.

For the rest of us, we only get involved in politics when we feel we have to, to protect ourselves and our families and neighbors. Or when it's fun and energizing, because a candidate connects to us at a personal level, and friends bring us along, and there's a big exciting party at the park. Or, mostly, we don't do politics, because we figure it won't make any difference, it'll just be politics as usual. And hearing a candidate say "Oh no it won't, not this time!" is hardly enough to move us.

"No more politics as usual" is exactly the platform of the extreme right wing. When politically progressive politicians say it, they're not improving their own chances to win at the polls – they're reinforcing their opponents' message.

Because what lies beneath and behind the phrase is contempt for our political system, not love of country. The radical right seeks to dismantle government of, by and for the people. If they get their way, those with power and privilege will get more, and the rest be damned. They dismiss and disavow our government and our democracy. When the President won the election, a leading American public figure said "I hope he fails." That doesn't sound like a patriotic American to me, but it didn't hurt his ratings any.

Please, if you're working from within the political system or trying to change it from the streets, don't go around making general negative statements about politics or politics as usual. Hone in on the things we want and need – good jobs, home, education, lively appealing neighborhoods, better ways to get around and take care of ourselves, a chance to do something. Tell me about the things you can do to help us get them, and about the things I can do, and about what we can do – all of us, in this together. We don't need less politics. We need more action.