
The Game of Politics

BY GEORGE C. LEEF

In a recent column in *Metro* magazine, published in Raleigh, North Carolina, the former chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Jim Leutze, lamented that “calling for conservation [is] like shouting down a well.” He is unhappy that the state legislature has so far resisted proposals to increase taxes to fund the kinds of conservation projects he favors.

His piece gives a wonderfully clear view into the mind of a modern political “liberal”—someone who thinks it’s good to impose taxes on the citizens of a state so politicians will have enough money to do what they want. That’s the game of politics.

Leutze is alarmed that “we are losing 277 acres of natural or agricultural land every day to development.” Phrasing it that way makes it sound as though a black hole were sucking away precious North Carolina real estate. I would like to suggest an alternative and less alarming view: owners of agricultural or natural land sell 277 acres of land per day to people who believe that they can profit by building something on the land. I don’t see why we should worry about voluntary transactions in which both buyer and seller expect to be better off. When people take raw materials (iron ore or trees, for example) and use them to make products, we don’t say that the resources have been “lost to development” but instead understand that they have been transformed into a different, more valuable state. I submit that we should look at real-estate sales the same way.

Now, just what is it that Leutze wants to conserve?

For one thing, he wants to ensure that we continue to have enough “open space.” In the abstract, that sounds desirable, but is there any possibility that North Carolinians would ever not have enough open space if the sort of land sales discussed above continue? I don’t see how. There are new developments going in all around Raleigh, but I have never for a second felt a shortage of open space. I didn’t even feel any shortage of space when I spent a weekend in New York City recently, and no part of North Carolina is ever going to be as heavily populated as New York. If this is really one of

Leutze’s concerns, all right, but it isn’t one of *this* taxpayer’s concerns.

Another thing Leutze worries about is the decline in fish houses along the coast. He writes, “The salty-talking, sun-tanned, gnarled-handed, squinty-eyed, independent waterman is a valued part of our culture as captured in song and legend. But you better take a quick look because his way of life is being squeezed out. To take only the aspect

of the problem relevant to this article, between 2000 and 2006, 39 of the 117 fish houses closed or were up for sale. That is a 33.3 percent decline.”

Perhaps to someone from around Wilmington, fish houses and the colorful characters who frequent them are charming, but—sorry—this taxpayer couldn’t care less. Whatever a fish house is, to me it isn’t a “beloved landmark,” and if the people who own them choose to

George Leef (georgeleef@aol.com) is the book review editor of The Freeman.

sell their properties, that doesn't make my life one bit worse. The same is true about the decline of other old-fashioned commercial enterprises, like barbershops and drive-in movies. Once they're no longer economically viable, I see no reason to keep them around for the sake of nostalgia.

None of Leutze's enthusiasms would matter to me if it weren't for his proposed way of satisfying them. He wants the government to increase taxes to accumulate funds so the state can purchase and conserve property. As I see it, that is simply using the coercive power of the government to force everyone to give up some money so that conservationists can get what they want at little expense to themselves.

Leutze advocates increased taxes on a variety of things, including real-estate conveyances, building permits, and restaurant meals. The new taxes would only add a little bit to our cost of living in the state, he observes, so why not use them so the government can afford more conservation?

That's modern liberalism for you. Let's forcibly extract a little more from the wallets of the people so public officials can do "good things" with the money. The trouble is, there is no end to the demands that interest groups make for the government to do "good things," and as a result, the tax burden continues to climb and climb. Focusing on the supposed benefit of saving fish houses and having more open space, Leutze ignores the fact that millions of individuals who have their own unique goals would be forced to give up some of their wealth to pay for conservation that is of no importance to them.

I can see no justification for employing the coercive power of the government against taxpayers just so a few individuals can bask in the warm feeling that they have done something for "society." That the amounts


involved are small (for example, a 1 percent restaurant meal tax) is just as irrelevant to the morality of this as it would be for a worker who steals from his employer to say, "I only take little things that will hardly be missed."

The Moral Alternative

There's an alternative to the use of government coercion. Those who want to conserve open space, fish houses, drive-ins, or anything else can attempt to raise the money through private contributions. The Nature Conservancy buys land that way. Leutze could set up a Save the Fish Houses Fund and ask for donations. That would no doubt be harder than importuning the politicians to raise taxes and buy the land he wants to protect from development, but it has the virtue of being morally respectable since it requires no coercion.

It might also work better. Years could elapse before the General Assembly acts, but if Leutze and others who share his concerns wanted to pool their money, they could probably buy a fish house next week.

Looking to government to accomplish social objectives through coercion is a bad habit many Americans have gotten into. People easily convince themselves that the things they want are really high-minded benefits for the whole of society, and so they play the political game of pleading with elected officials to spend tax dollars according to their vision. That leads to a heavily politicized country where tremendous resources are squandered on campaigning and lobbying—and where taxes keep increasing.

We would be much better off if the government stuck to the few tasks necessary to protecting people's rights and left everything else to voluntary efforts. 

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