

Wanted: Credible Centrist Political Leaders

WASHINGTON – Recently, a Democratic party elected leader of national renown argued in a public forum that in order to regain lost momentum and credibility with the American voters the Democrats have to redefine themselves as the party of economic growth and inclusiveness.

Common sense messages

At a national event focused on the future of U.S. small businesses, a Republican national leader claimed that America's greatness rests on its foundations as an opportunity society in which people can advance because of a rules based system that recognizes and rewards merit.

John Hickenlooper, the Governor of Colorado, a successful state chief executive, stated that through collaboration between Republican and Democrats we can find workable compromises on the future of the US health care system, and other national priorities.

Well, what do I make of all this? Very simple. These statements made by credible centrists in both parties raise the hope that it may be possible, even in this incredibly poisoned political climate, to rally millions of Americans, hopefully a majority, around the basic ideas of an optimistic country in which policy-makers promote economic growth, while upward mobility is based on genuine merit; and nobody is excluded or kept from advancing because of social class, gender, race, or anything else. In fact, the opposite –equal opportunity for all- is embraced by all.

And this must include quality education, the best foundation of future success in life, available to everyone; while bridges are built across every divide, and doors are wide open

to all who are willing to make an effort.

It is an old idea

This idea of America as a level playing field and fair rules used to be a shared vision embraced by most. Indeed, it was the belief that America offered genuine opportunity that attracted millions of immigrants who wanted to create in America a better life for themselves. It is about time to re-propose this vision in a manner that can be shared by today's Americans –Democrats and Republicans.

Indeed, who could object to public policies that promote economic growth, social advancement based on merit, while all citizens have genuine access to quality education, careers and consequently a good seat at the table?

Lost hope

Of course, the last few years have told us an entirely different story. It is a story of lost hope, deep disappointment, and resentment. A story of popular distrust in the honesty and abilities of most elected leaders. A story of exaggerated promises not kept.

This has created an emotional anti-government rebellion on the right, ("*Washington is a rotten place*"), and the triumph of policy agendas on the left which advocate economic and social re-balancing achieved through redistribution by taking (ill-gotten gains) from the few ultra rich and giving to the rest of society. All this will be wisely designed and orchestrated by government, through taxation and subsidies.

Despondent America

The outcome of all this is not pretty. The unexpected outcome of the November 2016 presidential elections is evidence of the widespread feeling of deep despair. Indeed, according to millions who voted for Donald Trump, "the system" failed

–period. Its failure is so deep that it is not worth salvaging. In fact, it should be dismantled. In fact, millions of Americans voted for Trump mostly because he is not a professional politician. Therefore he is untarnished by Washington's rot and well equipped to "*clean the stables*", "*drain the swamp*" and all by himself –with his power and superior intelligence– transform America.

Paradoxically, notwithstanding continuous economic growth and much lower unemployment since the end of the Great Recession in 2010, rightly or wrongly millions of Americans who used to be part of a self-confident middle class now are and feel poorer, left behind and alienated. At the same time, millions of young people feel hopeless facing a world of diminished opportunities, while laboring under the crushing weight of absurdly large student debts.

There is a way out

That said, I sense that there is a way out of this. Difficult, yes; but not impossible. Yes, America needs house cleaning. It needs fresh faces not tainted by the old ways of doing business.

The unimaginative political elites still populating Washington, DC have survived by over promising everything to everybody, while pretending to pay for all the goodies they offered to various (of course deserving) constituencies, knowing full well that the only way to finance all this public largess (unaffordable entitlements) was and is to borrow more and more, this way getting the country deeper and deeper into debt.

Sadly, the Washington elites have no real economic growth strategy, while their policies aimed at buying votes through entitlements funded by public money and more and more borrowing are driving America towards the abyss of insolvency.

Credible people who will tell the truth

Most Americans have common sense. However, they need credible new leaders who will tell the unvarnished truth about the dangers of systemic and growing fiscal imbalances, (i.e. we have to agree on a sensible plan to reform all major federal entitlement programs, by far our biggest fiscal problem), while pointing the only way to get out of this ditch: economic policies (think tax reform and smart deregulation affecting business activities) that will promote a more robust economic growth in a genuinely open and inclusive society. An inclusive society in which elected leaders are committed to destroying all artificial barriers to entry, while opening new avenues of opportunity to all.

(President Donald Trump, a new leader who is not carrying the baggage of the distrusted establishment politicians, could lead the way in shaping a new American political conversation. As his presidency is just getting started, it is impossible to say whether he will engage in this effort or not. We should all hope that he will. This would benefit the country and him).

Impossible?

Well, in the end all this “back to basics” idea founded on the values of openness, fairness and merit sounds too lofty, in fact unrealistic. Yes, this is an appeal to an admittedly mythologized idea of an America *“where anything is possible as long as you work hard and play by the rules”* which (truth be told) never fully existed in the way many refer to it.

And then there is the huge problem of yanking benefits away from millions (deserving or undeserving, it does not matter) who got used to getting them. *“Come on...get real. Nobody gets elected by promising less, let alone by promising to cut existing benefits. And we in Washington just do not know how to deliver stronger economic growth. We only know how to distribute subsidies”*.

The way ahead

And yet, if we do not want to see America follow Europe on the path leading to historic decline, it is imperative to make real progress on these two related fronts:

1) restore fiscal sanity by reforming all the major entitlement programs

2) genuinely and forcefully promote economic growth and real opportunity for all

The alternative is political chaos, the de-legitimization of our institutions, and rapid economic decline.

Some elected leaders of both parties know this. I just hope that their common sense message will be heard, understood and embraced.