



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Think Globally, Act Absurdly **by Scott McPherson**

“We didn’t run for office just to rake the leaves and tend to tree trimming. We’ve got ideas.”

— George L. Leventhal, vice president,
Montgomery County (Maryland) Council

That statement sums up the essence of so-called progressivism. If you’ve got ideas about the way things are supposed to be, take control of government, impose your vision through the force of law, and tax people — especially rich people — to pay for it all.

After all, there are far more important things to consider than just raking leaves and trimming trees when you’re in charge of the government: “For those of us who have the values that we have,” says Leventhal, “there is a great desire to show what government can do.”

Note to the people of Montgomery County, Maryland: Hold on to your wallets and get ready for disaster — they’re from the government, and they’re here to help.

Faced with political setbacks in the last two major elections — Republican George W. Bush was reelected president and Republican Robert Ehrlich was elected governor — leftists on the council plan to focus on promoting “progressive” ideas by means of their near-complete control of that county’s government. “This is an activist council,” says Leventhal.

Out of nine seats on the council, Democrats hold eight. “There has never been a more important time to be in local government,” says council president Tom Perez. “Because of gridlock on Capitol Hill and Annapolis, we are going to take the bull by the horn and we are going to be innovative because I believe in progressive government.... We are going to push the envelope.”

“Do we wait another four years to see if there is going to be a Democrat in the White House, or do we act locally?” asked council member Steven Silverman. “The answer is, we act locally.”

Translation: Fearful that Washington and Annapolis might take a break from forcing government mandates, and the heavy taxes needed to sustain them, down people’s throats (would

that that were true!), Montgomery County will become the flagship for activist government. And boy! do they plan to act!

Last year the council voted to provide all county residents with discount pharmacy cards, and recently the county executive, Douglas Duncan, “announced plans to spend \$20 million by 2010 to make sure 40,000 uninsured residents — about half of the county’s uninsured population — have free access” to health care, according to the *Washington Post* (December 12).

Montgomery County now has the distinction of being “the first in the nation to approve standards for cable modem service,” which is a nice way of describing a law that gives county government the authority to micromanage cable companies’ customer service — even how quickly they answer their phones.

Other ideas under consideration are laws designed to harass “predatory lenders” (read: “easy places for poor people to get loans”), increases in subsidized housing, and encouragement (read: “more subsidies”) for “clean energy” and “environmentally sensitive buildings.” All are bound to strangle county residents and businesses with millions more in taxes, miles of red tape, and mountains of regulations.

Montgomery County will also expand a program that “matches day laborers ... with employers.” Are employers actually having a hard time finding day labor? Not likely, but let’s not let common sense get in the way of grand ideas. Councilman Silverman also wants to forbid county residents from throwing away cardboard, part of his greater vision for adding to an already draconian and expensive county recycling regime.

At least one council member is hesitant to launch blindly into this brave new world. Councilman Phil Andrews told the *Post* that he was “concerned the county is getting spread too thin” by all this government spending. “We need to make some hard choices,” he said. “We need to keep the tax burden reasonable.”

Not low, mind you — just “reasonable.” Bear in mind that Montgomery County residents already pay a county income tax of 3.20 percent — the highest in the state.

Which raises an important question: How left-wing does someone have to be to deserve the accolade of “progressive”? Montgomery County’s elected officials are proposing a massive expansion of government spending, suggesting that they must pick up the slack for the failure of the federal and state governments to act in a similarly “progressive” manner.

But as of 2003, the federal government was spending \$744 *billion* per year on Social Security and Medicare payments alone. Direct payments to individuals for retirement, health, disability, and welfare programs exceed \$800 billion annually. In fact, total welfare spending is almost what the government was spending to fight World War II. Today, the welfare industry is actually larger than the defense industry, with a price tag in the hundreds of billions of dollars every single year.

President Bush has yet to veto a single spending bill that has landed on his desk and proudly declared that “the role of government is to stand side by side with our citizens to help them realize their dreams.”

Between 1996 and 2000, Maryland spending on child welfare services almost doubled, from \$188,895,827 to \$355,526,643. Then there’s food stamps, school lunches, housing subsidies, earned-income tax credits, the “Family Investment Program” — the list goes on and on.

Yet regardless of how much is being spent, “progressives” will always lobby for more. And once they’ve got it, a new, higher standard for “progressiveness” is unfurled.

This strategy not only keeps the welfare state machine growing, it provides job opportunities for “progressive” politicians. The *Washington Post* reported that “county leaders say they are ready to use the county as an incubator for progressive policies.” Such “activism” may keep politicians employed in Montgomery County, but it sucks the life from a free and prosperous society.

Scott McPherson is a policy advisor at The Future of Freedom Foundation.

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