

LECTURE

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What Conservatives Are For *The Honorable Mike Lee*

Abstract

On April 22, 2013, Senator Mike Lee (R-UT) addressed an audience at The Heritage Foundation outlining a conservative vision of a free society based on American first principles. Two institutions lie at the core of American freedom, said Lee: free enterprise and civil society. American-style freedom brings people together, while big-government policies divide people into interest groups and turn citizens into dependents. Lee flatly rejects the liberal claim that conservatives oppose progress, and he makes the case that elected conservatives must do a better job of presenting the conservative vision to the American public.

I want to offer my best wishes to all of you as The Heritage Foundation embarks on an exciting new era. I also just want to make clear that when I spent my first year in the Senate joking that Jim DeMint should run for President—this isn't what I had in mind!

The thing that makes Jim DeMint a great leader is the same thing that has always made people like [Heritage Vice President] Matt Spalding and The Heritage Foundation itself so valuable. That is, the shared insistence on making the positive case for conservatism: what conservatives are for.

In Washington, it is common for both parties to succumb to easy negativity. Republicans and Democrats stand opposed to each other, obviously, and outspoken partisanship gets the headlines. This negativity is unappealing on both sides.

And it helps explain why the federal government is increasingly held in such low regard by the American people. But for the Left, the

KEY POINTS

- The conservative vision of American freedom depends on free enterprise and civil society; the great obstacle to realizing this vision today is government dysfunction.
- A new conservative reform agenda should center on three basic principles: equality, diversity, and sustainability.
- Equality means everyone plays by the same rules with no more preferential policymaking. Diversity is another name for federalism. The federal government makes too many mistakes because it makes too many decisions. Most of them it doesn't have to make—and therefore shouldn't. The states, however, should.
- Once we eliminate policy privilege and restore policy diversity, we can start ensuring policy sustainability. When the federal government stops doing things it shouldn't, it can start doing the things it should—and do them better.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1227>

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defensive crouch at least makes sense. Liberalism's main purpose today is to defend its past gains from conservative reform. But negativity on the Right, to my mind, makes no sense at all.

The Left has created this false narrative that liberals are *for* things, and conservatives are *against* things. When we concede this narrative, if only implicitly, we concede the debate before it even begins.

And, yet, too many of us—elected conservatives especially—do it anyway. We take the bait. A liberal proposes an idea, we explain why it won't work, and we think we've won the debate. But even if we do, we reinforce that false narrative, winning battles while losing the war.

This must be frustrating to the scholars of The Heritage Foundation, who work every day producing new ideas for conservatives to be *for*. But it should be even more frustrating to the conservatives around the country whom the elected conservatives are supposed to serve. After all, conservative voters know what they're for. Why don't conservatives in office?

Perhaps it's because it's so easy in Washington to forget. In Washington, we debate public policy so persistently that we can lose sight of the fact that policies are means, not ends. We say we are for lower taxes, or less regulation, or spending restraint. But those are just policies we advocate. They're not what we're really for.

What we're really for are the good things those policies will yield to the American people. What we're really for is the kind of society those policies would allow the American people to create, together.

Together. If there is one word too often missing from our debate today that's it: together.

In the last few years, we conservatives seem to have abandoned words like "together," "compassion," and "community," as if their only possible meanings were a secret code for statism. This is a mistake. Collective action doesn't only—or even usually—mean government action.

Conservatives cannot surrender the idea of community to the Left, when it is the vitality of our communities upon which our entire philosophy depends. Nor can we allow one politician's occasional conflation of "compassion" and "bigger government" to discourage us from emphasizing the moral core of our worldview.

Conservatism is ultimately not about the bills we want to pass, but about the nation we want to be. If

conservative politicians want the American people to support our agenda for the government, we have to do a better job of showing them our vision for society. And of re-connecting our agenda to it. We need to remind the American people—and perhaps, too, the Republican Party itself—that the true and proper end of political subsidiarity is social solidarity.

Conservative Social Solidarity

Ours has never been a vision of isolated, atomized loners. It is a vision of husbands and wives; parents and children; neighbors and neighborhoods; volunteers and congregations; bosses and employees; businesses and customers; clubs, teams, groups, associations—and friends. The essence of human freedom, of civilization itself, is cooperation. This is something conservatives should celebrate. It's what conservatism is all about. Freedom doesn't mean "you're on your own." It means "we're all in this together."

Free enterprise and civil society are not good because they work—they work because they are good.

Our vision of American freedom is of two separate but mutually reinforcing institutions: a free enterprise economy and a voluntary civil society. History has shown both of these organic systems to be extremely efficient at delivering goods and services. But these two systems are not good because they work. They work because they are good. Together, they work for everyone because they impel everyone to work together. They harness individual self-interest to the common good of the community, and ultimately the nation. They work because in a free market economy and voluntary civil society, whatever your career or your cause, your success depends on your service. The only way to look out for yourself is to look out for those around you. The only way to get ahead is to help other people do the same.

What, exactly, are all those supposedly cut-throat, exploitive businessmen and women competing for? For figuring out the best way to help the most people. That's what the free market does. It rewards people for putting their God-given talents and their own exertions in the service of their neighbors. Whatever money they earn is the wealth they create, value they add to other people's lives.

No matter who you are, or what you're after, the first questions anyone in a free market must ask him- or herself is: How can I help? What problems need to be solved? What can I do to improve other people's lives? The free market does not allow anyone to take—it impels everyone to give.

The same process works in our voluntary civil society. Conservatives' commitment to civil society begins, of course, with the family, and the paramount, indispensable institution of marriage. But it doesn't end there. Just as individuals depend on free enterprise to protect them from economic oppression, families depend on mediating institutions to protect them from social isolation. That is where the social entrepreneurs of our civil society come in.

Free enterprise is the greatest weapon against poverty ever conceived by man.

Just like for-profit businesses, non-profit religious, civic, cultural, and charitable institutions also succeed only to the extent that they serve the needs of the community around them. Forced to compete for voluntary donations, the most successful mediating institutions in a free civil society are at least as innovative and efficient as profitable companies. If someone wants to make the world a better place, a free civil society requires that he or she do it well.

Social entrepreneurs know that only the best soup kitchens, the best community theater companies, and the best youth soccer leagues—and, for that matter, the best conservative think tanks—will survive.

So they serve. They serve their donors by spending their resources wisely. They serve their communities by making them better places to live. And they serve their beneficiaries, by meeting needs together better than they can meet them alone.

Freedom doesn't divide us. Big government does. It's big government that turns citizens into supplicants, capitalists into cronies, and cooperative communities into competing special interests. Freedom, by contrast, unites us. It pulls us together, and aligns our interests. It draws us out of ourselves and into the lives of our friends, neighbors, and even perfect strangers. It draws us upward, toward the best version of ourselves. The free market and civil society are not things more Americans need

protection from. They're things more Americans need access to.

Liberals scoff at all this. They attack free enterprise as a failed theory that privileges the rich, exploits the poor, and threatens the middle class. But our own history proves the opposite. Free enterprise is the only economic system that does not privilege the rich. Instead, it incentivizes them to put their wealth to productive use serving other people—or eventually lose it all.

Free enterprise is the greatest weapon against poverty ever conceived by man. If the free market exploits the poor, how do liberals explain the fact that the richest nation in human history mostly descends from immigrants who originally came here with nothing?

Nor does free enterprise threaten the middle class. Free enterprise is what created the middle class in the first place. The free market created the wealth that liberated millions of American families from subsistence farming, opening up opportunities for the pursuit of happiness never known before or since in government-directed economies.

Progressives are equally dismissive of our voluntary civil society. They simply do not trust free individuals and organic communities to look out for each other, or solve problems without supervision.

They think only government—only they—possess the moral enlightenment to do so. To be blunt, elite progressives in Washington don't really believe in communities at all. No, they believe in community organizers. Self-anointed strangers, preferably ones with Ivy League degrees, fashionable ideological grievances, and a political agenda to redress those grievances.

For progressives believe that the only valid purpose of "community" is to accomplish the agenda of the state. But we know from our own lives that the true purpose of our communities is, instead, to accomplish everything else. To enliven our days. To ennoble our children. To strengthen our families. To unite our neighborhoods. To pursue our happiness, and protect our freedom to do so.

This vision of America that conservatives seek is not an Ayn Rand novel. It's a Norman Rockwell painting, or a Frank Capra movie: a society of "plain, ordinary kindness, and a little looking out for the other fellow, too."

The great obstacle to realizing this vision today is government dysfunction. This is where our vision

must inform our agenda. What reforms will make it easier for entrepreneurs to start new businesses? For young couples to get married and start new families? And for individuals everywhere to come together to bring to life flourishing new partnerships and communities? What should government do—and, equally important, not do—to allow the free market to create fresh economic opportunities and to allow civil society to create new social capital?

It is government corruption and inefficiency that stand between the American people and the economy and society they deserve.

We conservatives are not against government. The free market and civil society depend on a just, transparent, and accountable government to enforce the rule of law. What we are against are two pervasive problems that grow on government like mold on perfectly good bread: corruption and inefficiency. It is government corruption and inefficiency that today stand between the American people and the economy and society they deserve.

To combat those pathologies, a new conservative reform agenda should center on three basic principles: equality, diversity, and sustainability.

1. Equality. The first and most important of these principles is equality. The only way for the free market and civil society to function, to tie personal success to interpersonal service, and to align the interests of the strong and the weak, is for everyone to play by the same rules. Defying this principle is how our government has always corrupted itself, our free market, and our civil society.

In the past, the problem was political discrimination that held the disconnected down. Today, government's specialty is dispensing political privileges to prop the well-connected up. In either case, the corruption is the same: official inequality, twisting the law to deem some people "more equal than others," making it harder for some to succeed even when they serve, and harder for others to fail even when they don't.

And so we have corporate welfare: big businesses receiving direct and indirect subsidies that smaller companies don't. We have un-civil society:

politicians funding large, well-connected non-profit institutions based on political favoritism rather than merit. We have venture socialism: politicians funneling taxpayer money to politically connected businesses that cannot attract real investors. We have regulatory capture: industry leaders influencing the rules governing their sectors to protect their interests and hamstringing innovative challengers.

The first step in a true conservative reform agenda must be to end this kind of preferential policymaking. Beyond simply being the right thing to do, it is a prerequisite for earning the moral authority and political credibility to do anything else.

Why should the American people trust our ideas about middle-class entitlements when we're still propping up big banks? Why should they trust us to fix the tax code while we use their tax dollars to create artificial markets for uncompetitive industries? Why should they trust our vision of a free civil society when we give special privileges to supposed non-profits like Planned Parenthood, public broadcasting, agricultural check-off programs, and the Export-Import Bank?

And, perhaps most important, why should Americans trust us at all, when too often, we don't really trust them? When we vote for major legislation, negotiated in secret, without debating it, without even reading it, deliberately excluding the American people from their own government?

For conservatives, equality needs to mean equality for everyone.

2. Diversity. The second principle to guide our agenda is diversity. Or, as you might have heard it called elsewhere: federalism. The biggest reason the federal government makes too many mistakes is that it makes too many decisions. Most of these are decisions the federal government doesn't have to make—and therefore shouldn't. Every state in the union has a functioning, constitutional government. And, just as important, each state has a unique political and cultural history, with unique traditions, values, and priorities.

Progressives today are fundamentally intolerant of this diversity. They insist on imposing their values on everyone. To them, the 50 states are just another so-called "community" to be "organized," brought to heel by their betters in Washington. This flies in the face of the Founders and the Constitution, of course. But it also flies in the face of common sense and experience.

The usurpation of state authority is why our national politics is so dysfunctional and rancorous.

We expect one institution—the federal government—to set policies that govern the lives of 300 million people, spread across a continent. Of course it’s going to get most of it wrong. That’s why successful organizations in the free market and civil society are moving in the opposite direction. While government consolidates, businesses delegate and decentralize. While Washington insists it knows everything, effective organizations increasingly rely on diffuse social networks and customizable problem solving.

We should not be surprised that—as Washington has assumed greater control over transportation, education, labor, welfare, health care, home mortgage lending, and so much else—all of those increasingly centralized systems are failing. Conservatives should seize this opportunity not to impose our ideas on these systems, but to “crowd-source” the solutions to the states. Let the unique perspectives and values of each state craft its own policies, and see what works and what doesn’t.

The first step in a true conservative reform agenda must be to end preferential policymaking. Not only is it the right thing to do, it is a prerequisite for earning the moral authority and political credibility to do anything else.

If Vermont’s pursuit of happiness leads it to want more government, and Utah’s less, who are politicians from the other 48 states to tell them they can’t have it? Would we tolerate this kind of official intolerance in any other part of American life?

A Pew study just last week found that Americans trust their state governments twice as much as the federal government, and their local governments even more. This shouldn’t be a surprise—it should be a hint. State and local governments are more responsive, representative, and accountable than Washington, D.C. It’s time to make them more powerful, too.

In the past, conservatives given federal power have been tempted to overuse it. We must resist this

temptation. If we want to be a diverse movement, we must be a tolerant movement. The price of allowing conservative states to be conservative is allowing liberal states to be liberal. Call it subsidiarity. Call it federalism. Call it constitutionalism. But we must make this fundamental principle of pluralistic diversity a pillar of our agenda.

3. Sustainability. That brings us to our third guiding principle. Once we eliminate policy privilege and restore policy diversity, we can start ensuring policy sustainability. Once the federal government stops doing things it shouldn’t, it can start doing the things it should, better. That means national defense and intelligence, federal law enforcement and the courts, immigration, intellectual property, and even the senior entitlement programs whose fiscal outlook threatens our future solvency and very survival.

Once we clear unessential policies from the books, federal politicians will no longer be able to hide—not from the public, nor from their constitutional responsibilities. Members of Congress will be forced to work together to reform the problems government has created in our health care system. We can fundamentally reform and modernize our regulatory system. We will be forced to rescue our senior entitlement programs from bankruptcy. And, we can reform our tax system to eliminate the corporate code’s bias in favor of big businesses over small businesses; and the individual code’s bias against saving, investing, and especially against parents, our ultimate investor class. That is how we turn the federal government’s unsustainable liabilities into sustainable assets.

The bottom line of all of this is that conservatives in *that* building [Congress] need to start doing what conservatives in *this* building [The Heritage Foundation] already do: think long and hard about what we believe, why we believe it, and most of all, remember to put first things first.

For conservatives, the first thing is not our agenda of political subsidiarity—it’s our vision of social solidarity. It is a vision of society as an interwoven and interdependent network of individuals, families, communities, businesses, churches, formal and informal groups working together to meet each other’s needs and enrich each other’s lives. It is of a free market economy that grants everyone a “fair chance and an unfettered start in the race of life.” It is of a voluntary civil society that strengthens our communities,

protects the vulnerable, and mends the gaps to make sure no one gets left behind. And, it is a vision of a just, tolerant, and sustainable federal government that protects and complements free enterprise and civil society, rather than presuming to replace them.

This vision will not realize itself. The Left, the inertia of the status quo, and the entire economy of this city stand arrayed against it. Realizing it will sometimes require conservatives to take on entrenched interests, pet policies, and political third-rails. Many of these will be interests traditionally aligned with—and financially generous to—the establishments of both parties. And, sometimes, it will require us to stand up for those for whom no one else will: the unborn child in the womb, the poor

student in the failing school, the reformed father languishing in prison, the single mom trapped in poverty, and the splintering neighborhoods that desperately need them all.

But if we believe that this vision is worth the American people *being for*, it's worth elected conservatives *fighting for*. What we are fighting for is not just individual freedom, but the strong, vibrant communities that free individuals form.

The freedom to earn a good living, and build a good life: that is what conservatives are for.

—*The Honorable Mike Lee represents Utah in the United States Senate, where he serves on the Judiciary, Energy and Natural Resources, and Armed Services Committees as well as the Joint Economic Committee.*