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OUR VIEW

Telling ag's story up-close and personally

The Wild West world of social media provides more heat than light to the online discussion of agriculture. Rare is the discussion about farming or ranching that doesn't attract a high-voltage rant based on ignorance, some political agenda or flat-out falsehood.

That's too bad, because there really is a lot to talk about.

Last week, the Ag Chat Foundation had its regional meeting near Spokane, Wash.

The speakers talked about what they do — write about food and agriculture — and encouraged those in attendance to join the conversation. Their counsel was to tell their story and not get into a verbal wrestling match with the skunks that lurk online looking for a fight.

That's sage advice. These days, the skunks seem to outnumber everyone else online. Even the most straightforward expression of fact will draw a screech personally attacking the author.

Such is the nature of 21st century "communications."

We've long favored communicating with members of the ag community and the public at large. That's what we do. Our printed newspaper and our online website allow folks from all walks of life to learn about farming and ranching and the many issues that face agriculture.

We also encourage bloggers and other pro-farming folks to tell their stories in a personal and factual way.

But we also support another means of helping the public understand farming — up-close and personal. A couple of weeks ago in Salem, Oregon Ag Fest gave about 18,000 children and their parents and grandparents a glimpse

of the wonders of agriculture. From a petting zoo to hands-on workshops, many exhibits and activities allowed young and old to meet farmers and ranchers and learn about what they do, and why.

As much could be learned standing around petting a sheep and asking questions of a nearby 4-H or FFA member as could be learned anywhere online.

Agriculture is a miracle. Coaxing plants from the rich earth, helping a new calf that's just taken its first breath — this is what attracts farmers and ranchers to a profession and lifestyle that is fulfilling in so many ways. The only way to understand that is to witness it first-hand.

Other efforts to inform the public about agriculture include the Oregon Agri-Business Council's Adopt-a-Farmer program, in which school children visit farms and learn about agriculture directly from farmers;

county and state fairs; and farmers' markets, roadside stands, U-pick operations and pumpkin patches. All of them add up to memorable experiences that help the public understand agriculture in a personal way.

There's no single answer to addressing the noisy critics that clog the Internet with their snide comments, rude insults and astounding displays of ignorance. If you took that away from them, they would have nothing.

The best thing farmers and ranchers can do is to open their doors to the vast majority of the public, who are genuinely interested in farming and ranching and how their food and fiber are produced.

Tell your story and don't get into a verbal wrestling match with the skunks that lurk online — even if those skunks seem to outnumber everyone else on the Internet.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

OTHER VIEWS

Let rural Oregon pump own gas

The (Eugene) Register-Guard

You know those T-shirts that say "Keep Oregon weird"? They should include a drawing of a hippie (it's always a hippie, right?) merrily pumping his or her own gas into a VW microbus.

For those not steeped in service-station lore, Oregon banned self-service gasoline in 1951, seven years before the nation's first pump-your-own gas station opened in Omaha, Neb. The prohibition is embedded in statutes dealing with explosives, suggesting that safety was lawmakers' primary concern six decades ago.

Opponents argued that a 1982 initiative to lift the ban would cost jobs, and would inconvenience the elderly and people with disabilities. The initiative ran into an electoral ditch, failing 58 percent to 42 percent. Oregon remains one of only two states — the other is New Jersey — that ban motorists from pumping their own gas.

So far the same arguments have not been marshaled against legislation authored by Rep. Cliff Bentz, D-Ontario, that would allow stations in counties with fewer than 40,000 residents to keep self-pay pumps turned on when no owner, operator or employee is around to serve customers.

Bentz and co-sponsor Sen. Ted Ferrioli, R-John Day, say the bill is needed because businesses in remote areas can't afford to man the pumps 24 hours a day.

The bill would apply to roughly half of the state's counties and would include the Columbia Gorge, Eastern Oregon and most coastal communities.

"If you're a tourist going into the outback of our state without a full tank

of gas, you better be prepared to sleep in your car, because it's going to be tough to find a gas station that's open after a certain hour," Ferrioli says.

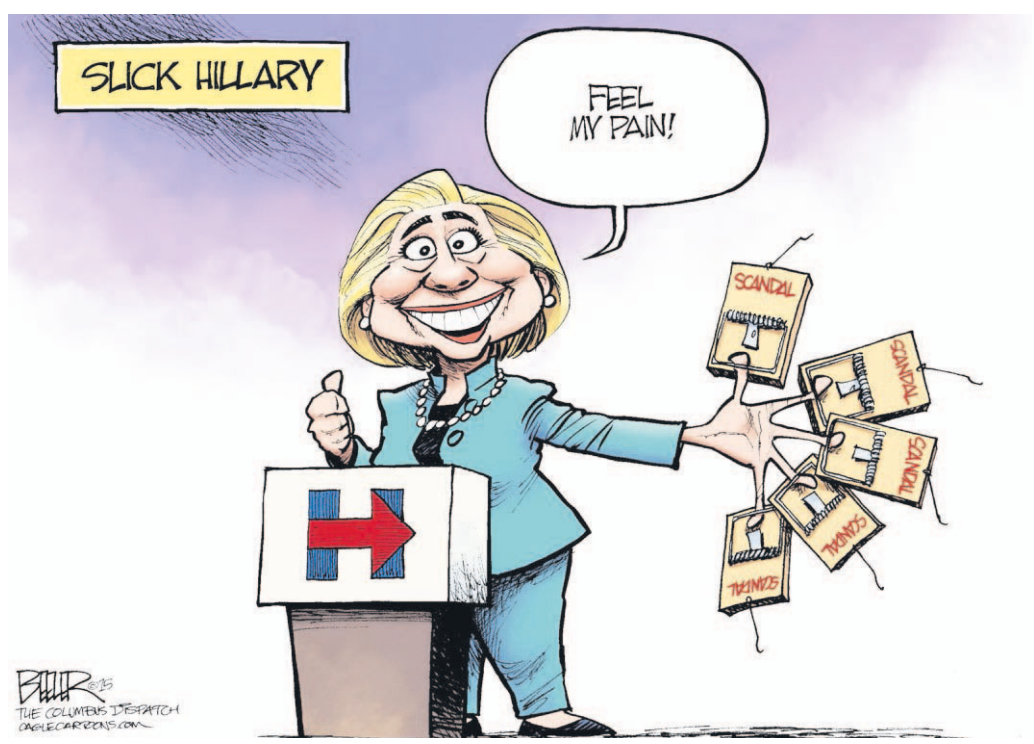
Ferrioli emphasizes that House Bill 3011 is not likely to lead to a full repeal of the ban on self-service.

That's a pretty safe bet, since Oregonians have swatted down every attempt to overturn the ban since it was instituted 64 years ago. Opposition has been so overwhelming that state lawmakers, despite industry prodding, haven't dared introduce a measure to overturn the ban since 2003.

With the proliferation of credit-card-reading pumps and spill-prevention mechanisms, another look at self-service gas might make sense. Most of the official reasons for the law, listed in statute, don't stand up to scrutiny, including "Exposure to toxic fumes represents a health hazard to customers dispensing (gasoline)," which is followed by "The hazard described ... (above) is heightened when the customer is pregnant."

Then there is "Self-service dispensing at retail contributes to unemployment, particularly among young people," a claim that might make sense if economists didn't dismiss it as unsubstantiated, based on the experience of the vast majority of states that have self-serve.

The House has unanimously approved HB 3011, and the Senate should do the same. But there's no evidence of widespread public support for changing Oregon's self-service ban. It's one of those quirks that Oregonians find endearing — and that, well, helps keep Oregon weird.



OTHER VIEWS

The center-right moment

The most surprising event of this political era is what hasn't happened. The world has not turned left. Given the financial crisis, widening inequality, the unpopularity of the right's stances on social issues and immigration, you would have thought that progressive parties would be cruising from win to win.

But, instead, right-leaning parties are doing well. In the United States, Republicans control both houses of Congress. In Israel, the Likud Party led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pulled off a surprising win in an election that was at least partly about economic policy. In Britain, the Conservative Party led by Prime Minister David Cameron won a parliamentary majority.

What's going on here?

Well, there are some issues in each election specific to that country, but there are a few broader trends to be observed. The first is that the cutting-edge, progressive economic arguments do not seem to be swaying voters.

Over the past few years, left-of-center economic policy has moved from opportunity progressivism to redistributionist progressivism. Opportunity progressivism is associated with Bill Clinton and Tony Blair in the 1990s and Mayor Rahm Emanuel of Chicago today. This tendency actively uses government power to give people access to markets, through support for community colleges, infrastructure and training programs and the like, but it doesn't interfere that much in the market, and it hesitates before raising taxes.

This tendency has been politically successful. Clinton and Blair had long terms. This year, Emanuel won by 12 percentage points against the more progressive candidate, Chuy Garcia, even in a city with a disproportionate number of union households.

Redistributionist progressivism more aggressively raises taxes to shift money down the income scale, opposes trade treaties and meddles more in the marketplace. This tendency has won elections in Massachusetts (Elizabeth Warren) and New York City (Bill de Blasio) but not in many other places. Ed Balls, the No. 2 figure in the Labour Party in Britain, co-lead the group from the Center for American Progress that wrote the most influential statement of modern progressivism, a report on "inclusive prosperity." Balls could not even retain his own parliamentary seat in the last election.

The conservative victories probably have more to do with the public's skepticism about the left than with any positive enthusiasm toward the right. Still, there are a few things that center-right parties have done successfully.

First, they have loudly (and sometimes offensively) championed national identity. In this era of globalization, voters are rewarding



DAVID BROOKS
Comment

candidates who believe in their country's exceptionalism.

Second, they have been basically sensible on fiscal policy. After the financial crisis, there was a big debate over how much governments should go into debt to stimulate growth. The two nations most associated with the "austerity" school — those who were suspicious of debt-based stimulus — were Germany and Britain. This will not settle the debate, but these two nations now have some of the strongest economies in Europe and their political leaders are in good shape.

Third, these leaders did not overread their mandate. Cameron in Britain promised to cut the size of government, and he did, from 45.7 percent of GDP in 2010 to 40.7 percent today, according to The Economist. The number of public-sector jobs there has gone down by 1 million.

But he made these cuts without going overboard. Public satisfaction with government services has gone up. And there have been some sensible efforts to boost those at the bottom.

As The Economist pointed out, "The richest 10 percent have borne the greatest burden of extra taxes. Full-time workers earning the minimum wage pay a third as much income tax as in 2010. Overall, inequality has not widened — in contrast to America."

The British electorate and the U.S. electorate sometimes mirror each other. Trans-Atlantic voters went for Reagan and Thatcher together and Clinton and Blair together. In policy terms, Cameron is a more conservative version of President Barack Obama.

Cameron's win suggests the kind of candidate that would probably do well in a general election in this country. He is liberal on social policy, green on global warming and pragmatically conservative on economic policy. If he's faulted for anything, it is for not being particularly ideological, although he has let his ministers try some pretty bold institutional reforms to modernize the welfare state.

Globally, voters are disillusioned with large public institutions. They seem to want to reassert local control and their own particular nationalism (Scottish or anything else). But they also seem to want a slightly smaller public sector, strong welfare state reform and more open and vibrant labor markets as a path to prosperity.

For some reason, U.S. politicians are fleeing from this profile, Hillary Clinton to the further left and Republicans to the right.

David Brooks became a New York Times Op-Ed columnist in September 2003. He has been a senior editor at The Weekly Standard, a contributing editor at Newsweek and the Atlantic Monthly, and is currently a commentator on "The Newshour with Jim Lehrer."

YOUR VIEWS

People have right to motorized access on U.S. forest lands

Do you want your access to public lands treated like a basketball game, where you have to worry about if you are "in bounds" or "out of bounds" and having to live with the penalties of not staying within the boundaries set forth by the Forest Service? That is exactly what your life will be if the proposed designation of routes language and travel management plan are put into place on our national forest.

Currently you are allowed to openly and freely access the Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur national forests via motorized means at your discretion unless otherwise noted by wilderness areas or areas specifically targeted as non-motorized.

Once roads areas are designated a use, all motorized use off those roads will be prohibited (within a given buffer along the road), going from an open forest system to a closed forest system. Much like the basketball court where you are not allowed to leave the court, motorized access will be disallowed

LETTERS POLICY

The East Oregonian welcomes original letters of 400 words or less on public issues and public policies for publication in the newspaper and on our website. The newspaper reserves the right to withhold letters that address concerns about individual services and products or letters that infringe on the rights of private citizens. Submitted letters must be signed by the author and include the city of residence and a daytime phone number. The phone number will not be published. Unsigned letters will not be published. Send letters to Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, 211 S.E. Byers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801 or email editor@eastoregonian.com.

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