Addressing the Problem

By John Clayton

More than once, I believe, I have dredged up the old saw that everyone hates Congress, except they kind of like their own congressman and keep sending him or her back in there. I guess this year was a little different, because they followed through on hating Congress, with an added dose of hating the party-in-power, or even more accurately (Just say it!) they hated the Democrats. They (well, not Maryland), voted them out.

What bothered me most about the election was not the partisan shift but the wiping out of the middle. Perhaps this isn’t really true, but it is my perception. As I have read, the solid right-wingers and the solid left-wingers all come from pretty safe districts that reflect their views, and they have relatively little trouble getting elected. The election seems to have made mincemeat out of Democrats who were trying to survive by being a little Republican and Republicans who were returning the favor. They were trying to work with the other side to make things happen. What a bunch of maroons. They’re gone. Good riddance. Congress now looks like a seven-ten split.

The truth gets completely lost in slogans, platitudes, and outright epithets, on any number of topics, and for all around truth-avoidance, deficit reduction is king. It is an important issue that can no longer be discussed in rational terms without slogans and rock-throwing. There are others, but none hold a candle to deficit reduction, which everyone is in favor of and no one wants to do anything about. Cut taxes? Okay, the deficit gets worse. More stimulus for the economy? High speed railroads? Subsidize ethanol and electric cars? Ditto. Where do we cut? Well, there’s always a lot of waste and fraud, right? We’ll cut that. Just cut something from them, not from me, okay? That’s why I was so encouraged by the initial report of the Commission on Deficit Reduction, or more accurately, the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform. This is where the chickens are really coming home to roost. It’s about time.

The report is a treasure trove of third rails that no politician would touch, but those third rails are where all our money goes. I don’t care if you are a Tea Partier or a charter member of MoveOn.org—you don’t want your or your mom’s Social Security or Medicare compromised. I understand; neither do I.

The history of this commission is enlightening. The commission was originally to have been approved by Congress and could have produced more binding recommendations, but it was defeated in reasonably bipartisan fashion, and most prominently by those who wouldn’t support an independent commission unless it agreed up front not to include tax increases in its recommendations. A number of prominent politicians were for the commission before they were against it. Therefore, the commission was created by the president, not by the Congress.

This isn’t a game for little ideas. Little ideas aren’t going to get us off our profligate ways, the problem is too big. The commission has recommendations that affect the structure of the tax code, including eliminating the mortgage interest tax deduction and increasing gasoline taxes. Income tax rates go down, but many other tax goodies disappear. The plan proposes cuts in domestic spending such as farm subsidies and healthcare, defense spending including overseas bases, foreign aid, Medicare, and Social Security.

The smart money is saying that the changes are way too radical to be approved by Congress, and one would be hard pressed to find anyone saying anything nice about any of the recommendations. Many oxen have been gored. The process is just beginning. Perhaps it will lead somewhere useful, which would be an improvement over the current level of discourse. It’s not really up to the politicians, either. It’s up to us. We hold the votes. We’re who they are afraid of.