

THE TAIL END OF CONSERVATISM

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In America, thousands suffer from eating disorders—due, in large part, to their skewed self-images. Many women believe that they are fatter than they are, which leads to dangerous dieting routines and eating habits.

I, on the other hand, suffer from what could be considered the “anti-eating disorder.” I actually think that I’m a lot thinner than I am.

This is a good problem to have, as I continue to eat all I want without ever sitting down to seriously contemplate my personal relationship with mayonnaise.

I continue to ignore the warning signs of getting fat. My belt loops provide me a daily news report on the state of my midsection. My belly button continues its long, slow march towards the television. And yet, I figure as long as I only gain a couple pounds a year, I’m doing okay.

As it turns out, I have kindred spirits among legislative Republicans in Wisconsin, who think the state budget looks just fine in neon spandex. The dairy state’s lawmakers continue to crow about the health of Wisconsin’s budget despite large spending increases, growing state structur-



al imbalances, and rising taxes. They believe that holding spending to an acceptable rate of growth is enough to pacify a public who already believes their taxes are too high.

The state’s cholesterol count doesn’t look good. According to the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, Wisconsin’s taxpayer burden ranks sixth in the nation relative to income. In 2004, state and local expendi-

tures claimed 21.9 percent of personal incomes, up from 20.2 percent in 1999. Total state and local taxes and fees have increased 47 percent in the past decade, despite a reduction in income tax revenue in 2002 due to the slumping economy. When an economic recession hits and tax revenue declines, the state still manages to spend more and more every year—even when Republicans control both houses of the Wisconsin Legislature.

Despite the best efforts of many good conservative office holders in Wisconsin, the way Wisconsin spends money is rigged to keep the cash flowing. Take, for example, our system of intra-governmental funding, which is an artery-clogging nachos grande of confusion

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and non-accountability. The state raises over a billion dollars per year, which they send back to local governments, presumably for property tax “relief.” When property taxes go up, a taxpayer doesn’t know who to blame—local officials complain that they don’t get enough money from the state, and state officials blame the local governments for increasing their levies. According to the Wisconsin Taxpayer Alliance, Wisconsin is seventh highest in the nation for the level at which the state government funds local governments.

In the end, the finger-pointing will continue, as the funding framework has built-in excuses for both levels of government. Over 60 percent of the state budget is made up of aids to local governments. Try to reduce state spending, and property taxes go up. If a local government tries to keep spending down, they lose eligibility for state aid. Try to change the system, and you get the reward Scott McCallum received for his proposal to end aids to local municipalities: A job in the private sector.

The way Wisconsin budgets also fails to provide adequate funding oversight. During the budget process, legislators are presented with documents that merely detail changes in funding—they get papers analyzing the governor’s proposals to add three percent here, and four percent there. Rarely are base reviews conducted as to whether programs deserve new funding. Programs about which there are questions receive smaller increases as punishment; nothing is ever actually cut.

Furthermore, during the budget process, there is one phrase that allows lawmakers to brag about fighting wasteful spending without actually doing so: “than the Governor.” We are told that Republican budgets tax less “than the Governor,” spend less “than the Governor,” bond less “than the Governor,” and have smaller deficits “than the Governor.”

Thus, when a budget is put together and political talking points are needed, all the

Legislature needs to do is be a little better than the Democratic governor on those key points, and the budget is considered a success. The assumption, of course, is that Wisconsin citizens will get around to giving them credit for responsible budgeting as soon as they’re done watching *American Idol*.

True fiscal conservatism remains the “Big Idea That’s Never Been Tried” in Wisconsin. In fact, it would be hard to point to a time at the state level when the Legislature buckled down and made tough decisions about Wisconsin’s total tax level. Instead, the budget rolls on for decades, gaining more and more weight, eventually wearing black socks, plaid shorts, and wrap-around sunglasses. Actually, wait—that’s me, again.

Wisconsin won’t die all at once, like the day that I’m found on the side of the road lying in a pool of my own Arby’s sauce. As taxes continue to rise, people will look at Wisconsin, decide the harsh winters and lack of jobs aren’t worth the trouble, and seek more fiscally friendly states. Rumor has it that trash even gets picked up in states below the Mason Dixon line, despite their lower tax burdens (we know that now because of the internet). As people flock from the state, so will businesses—leaving fewer taxpayers to pick up the ever-growing tab.

Wisconsin Republicans will continue to seek credit for holding down our government’s rate of increase, just as I give myself credit for only getting a little fatter every year. But in the end, the only thing that will save us both is to hit the treadmill and shed the extra pounds. Not a pleasant experience, but a necessary one.

So has conservatism in Wisconsin run out of gas? I’ll tell you when I’m done with this burrito.