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Hillsdale College
National Meeting of The Philadelphia Society
March 28, 2009
New Orleans, Louisiana

Country Mouse and City Mouse

A couple of weeks ago I asked my freshman history class how many of them knew Aesop's story of the City Mouse and the Country Mouse. The only ones who raised their hands were my granddaughters, who went to the Hillsdale Academy where they actually read such things. I had asked the class several weeks earlier how many of them had ever set foot on a working farm. Not one, including my granddaughters, raised a hand. They all can text message, but not one can grow a tomato. Hillsdale College is the educational conservative poster-child, right? I would say, then, that the conservative movement is doomed.

To "conserve" means exactly that. The Country Mouse who was lured to the big city by his cosmopolitan cousin was a simple republican self-governing mouse, and when he found that he would have to live by his wits and on welfare to enjoy the text-messaging life, he went home. His simple life was also dangerous; the number of country mice my old dog has dug out of their holes proves that. But the country mouse understands his relation to the created order, knows his smelly neighbors, and HAS SOMETHING TO CONSERVE!

What he has to conserve is place, family, and—well, let me put it the way our ancestors said it: "but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid." (Micah 4:4) This was in English and American history the basic definition of liberty, and sums up what there is to conserve. If our vines and fig trees are abstractions like "free markets" or "equality" and not being afraid means we have to send armies all over the world, we are just ideologues and should call ourselves something other than "conservative."

My friend and mentor Russell Kirk gave us much to define the "conservative movement," but nothing so important as his insistence that whatever else we are, we are contra ideologie. Forrest McDonald said in 1983 that "conservatism as I understand it and believe in it is not an ideology or a program—its programmatic content varies with place and time—but a set of values and an attitude toward changes in the established social order. Its opposite is not any particular dogmatic secular religion—such as communism, socialism, or fascism, but dogmatic secular religion itself." He went on to say (here I'm paraphrasing) that conservatives prefer history (reality) to abstraction, "moderation to extremism," reject all ideas of human perfectibility, know that evil is real and that the world is not made out of play-dough.

I remember as if it were yesterday sitting at dinner the night before the Philadelphia Society meeting was to begin, just about this time of year in 1981. There was euphoria in the room: We had WON! The world would be better, because now we would get to handle the play-dough. My heart sank into my shoes. So many of my friends thought that it was all a game of politics. Regime change rules the world. It was only then that I began truly to appreciate what Russell Kirk and Gerhart Niemeyer had been telling me for years. Politics, even at its best, is merely a reflection of what in the families, churches, and communities. The good, true and beautiful are never created by the state. Walter Lippman got it right in 1938 in what he called “the dominant dogma of the age”—held by socialists, fascists, communists, and liberals alike: “Their promise is that through the power of the state men can be made happy.”

Robert Taft once said that “you can’t deal the New Deal.” You can’t. When we try, we just shift conservatism one step to the left until we are conserving only what the last generation of progressives put in place.

What was there to conserve? We eventually ceased being conservatives and became merely Republicans. This made it easy for savvy types to make us into purely political animals. Do you remember what Bill Buckley said when he was asked what he would do if he won the mayoral election in New York City? He said, “I would demand a recount.” He knew that what he had to offer was a way of looking at the government that came from beyond it.

What is there to conserve? If you’re not first a Country Mouse, not much. I was privileged to join this society in 1976, when Don Lipsett came to my home in Bill Buckley’s hand-me-down Cadillac limo and drove me around Hillsdale like the king he made so many of us feel like we should be. Don really believed that Adam Smith ties would save the world, especially at \$20 apiece and two for \$44. He also believed that North Adams, Michigan was the proper and good place for the international headquarters of the Philadelphia Society. And it was, because Norma fixed hurt birds there, and Don piled up papers all over his storefront and stayed up late to watch for the “Russkies” and kept us all together because as long as we knew that there is something worth conserving we could overlook differences that are often only cosmetic.

I do believe that the leadership and membership of this society still operates in that same spirit, and if there is going to be a conservative movement that reflects its legitimate parts, it will meet here and with us. It’s not bad for us to be down right now. Sometimes you have to lose in order to remember what’s important. My pastor likes to say, “the Church is never better than when she’s poor and under siege.” Let ideologues be ideologues, and country mice be country mice, and conservatism has a chance.