

Elitists in Populist Clothing

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I don't mean to quibble with the notion that Scott Brown – as a truck driver and former nude centrefold – is well qualified to sit in the U.S. Senate. It's the notion that he's a populist that sticks in my craw.

But it's his alleged populism that led to his dramatic upset win last week in Ted Kennedy's old seat.

Right-wingers like Brown hide the elitism of their agenda by presenting themselves as ordinary working types, as truck-driving, gun-toting folk who may have just slaughtered something with their bare hands in the back shed.

Nothing could be less populist than the right's agenda – which reached its zenith under George W. Bush – with tax cuts for the rich, financial deregulation and whittling away labour and social protections.

After being elected with a mandate for change, Barack Obama has seemed powerless to change much, continuing the giveaways and deference to Wall Street.

No wonder the people are in revolt.

Stung by Brown's victory, Obama moved last week to recapture some populist ground, announcing previously stalled plans to bring in tough new banking regulations.

This would be a good beginning for an aggressive new populist agenda – both in the United States and Canada – aimed at reducing the power of the small, wealthy elite.

While the right likes to suggest that educated, well-spoken liberals are the elite, in fact, real power over the political agenda is exercised by the super-rich, whose wealth and power has grown immensely in the last few decades. Not since the late 1920s has the top 1 per cent enjoyed such a large share of the national income in both countries.

We seem to have learned nothing from the 1930s, when the perpetrators of the 1929 Wall Street crash were subjected to what amounted to a public flogging at Senate hearings, led by the relentless prosecutor Ferdinand Pecora.

Responding to public anger, president Franklin Roosevelt took action that limited the power of the wealthy, signing tough new banking laws and strong pro-labour legislation, and pushing up taxes on the rich.

In a 1936 speech at Madison Square Garden, FDR denounced the forces of big money:

“Never before in all our history have these forces been so united against one candidate as they stand today. They are unanimous in their hate for me – and I welcome their hatred.”

There’s little of that today. Indeed, the same elite which brought us policies that led to the recent Wall Street collapse and economic decline retains its power and public prominence unchecked today.

Our own public broadcaster has responded to the crisis by ramping up the conservative economic message – giving a huge new platform, for instance, to wealthy neo-conservative Kevin O’Leary, who uses his daily spot on CBC News Network to celebrate greed and the infinite wisdom of the market. (There’s little balance since his co-anchor sticks to the journalistic practice of not taking a position.)

Progressives in both the U.S. and Canada have vacated crucial populist ground, shying away from challenging the power of the plutocracy – for fear of looking like they’re engaging in a divisive class war.

But attacking the extraordinary power the rich wield today is not only good politics, it’s essential if we want economic benefits for all and meaningful democracy.

Meanwhile, beware of truck-driving centerfolds in sheep’s clothing. Underneath that buff populist skin may be just another wily wolf working for Wall Street.

Linda McQuaig’s column appears every other week. lmcquaig@sympatico.ca

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