

ANTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

INTERVIEW WITH ALVIN TOFFLER

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By Kevin Kelly

Remember Alvin Toffler? A year ago he was the pop futurist you could not get away from. As the supposed mentor of future-hugging Newt Gingrich - then at his celebrity apex - Toffler's views on the current political tilt were in high demand. But this year, traditional election politics are in effect, and the future has disappeared. In fact, the future is being embalmed by presidential campaigning. We say: it's time for a look ahead. The media have decamped from Toffler's front lawn, so we asked him what he and his wife, Heidi Toffler, have been contemplating lately on anticipatory democracy, grading Newt, revising the Constitution, and other matters of civilization building.

KELLY: WHAT'S THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DIGITAL GENERATION AND EMERGING THIRD WAVE POLITICS?

TOFFLER: The rise of the digital generation is part of a larger historical process, which involves culture, economics, social institutions, and so on. But it's a very powerful part. I think we're about to see an overall change in the politics of the country, during which the digital community will become much more conscious of its own political role.

YOU'VE SAID BEFORE THAT THE DIGERATI SHOULD PAY MORE ATTENTION TO POLITICS. WHAT SHOULD WE BE DOING?

Newt has said that every piece of legislation should be vetted from the point of view of whether it accelerates the transition to a Third Wave society. That is also the responsibility of the digital community. It means looking at everything, from tax policy to access issues to civil rights. For example, one of the issues we've raised repeatedly is the depreciation schedules that disadvantage the best, most dynamic companies in the country. The digital community has to be involved in these issues.

DO YOU SEE THIRD WAVE POLITICS BEING ORGANIZED INTO A CAPITAL-LETTER POLITICAL PARTY?

That will depend on what happens over the next two years. If it turns out to be gridlock, frustration, difficulty, pain and agony, and no payoff, then I think a third - even fourth - party will materialize to meet the needs of the digital community. But if you take a look at other countries, more political parties do not necessarily mean better government.

SOME SUGGEST WE THINK OF CITIZENS AS CUSTOMERS. IS THIS ONE OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE THIRD WAVE - THAT THERE ARE NO CITIZENS, ONLY CUSTOMERS?

To say that we're all customers focuses on a single dimension of the relationship. Yeah, citizens buy government services. But there's a lot more going on in social existence than simple contractual relationships between customers and suppliers. That is far too narrow of a model. Whether we like it or not, there is a world of religion and feeling out there that cannot simply be reduced to contractual relationships.

LAST YEAR YOU WERE VERY OPTIMISTIC THAT WE WERE ON THE CUSP OF CHANGE IN THE OVERALL POLITICS OF THE COUNTRY AND THAT THERE WOULD BE A BEGINNING OF A POLITICAL REALIGNMENT. DO YOU STILL FEEL THAT WAY?

Yes. But it's not the realignment that most people think. I believe the election campaign and the battle between the two parties is ... I won't say it's irrelevant; the parties still command control of the incredibly large budgets. But the fact of the matter is the real politics in the country are reflected not in the distribution of votes

between Democrats and Republicans, but rather in the “none” votes of the rest of the population, and in the revulsion of the population toward the system itself. And that has grown enormously and dangerously in the last year.

YOU MEAN THE SYSTEM COULD SUDDENLY COLLAPSE?

We should learn a lot from what happened to the Soviets. They carried the Second Wave bureaucratic model to its ultimate, and we saw how fragile that system became. We’re infinitely better off, because we’re more loosely organized and more decentralized, more democratic. But I believe we are not immune to the kind of breakdown that we have seen there. One can, in one’s nightmare, imagine American Chechnyas.

IS THIS WHERE THE MILITIAS AND THE SEPARATISTS COME IN?

I believe they and others, probably not yet even formed, could be the American equivalent of the Aum Shinrikyo. (See “The Cult at the End of the World,” this issue.)

WHAT HAPPENED TO NEWT’S REVOLUTION?

Right after he came in, he was fighting to pass the Contract With America. Well, the Contract With America was never a particularly Third Wave document. The only reason we felt it had any far-reaching importance was that it tried to move in the direction of devolution.

DEVOLUTION? AS IN ANARCHY AND COLLAPSE?

I’m using devolution to mean the peaceful push of power downward, a peaceful redistribution of decision-making from the center down.

HOW IS DEVOLUTION TO BE DISTINGUISHED FROM THE NIGHTMARISH SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS?

We take the paramilitaries very seriously as sort of incipient separatist movements. Separatism is beyond devolution. I believe the only way to prevent the kind of outbreaks of separatism in the United States that Europe has been feeling for quite a while is to get ahead of the curve.

SO, WHAT WOULD A REAL THIRD WAVE CONTRACT WITH AMERICA HAVE SAID?

Well, I think it would have said some of the things that Newt said outside the contract. Every kid should either have a laptop or access to its equivalent. And the country as a whole needs to be prepared to survive in an economy that is much more demassified than the one we are all accustomed to. We complain that kids don’t know where Albania is. Well, there’s another geography they know nothing about and that’s the invisible social geography that they grow up in. What’s the relationship between a department store, a police station, a bank, a hospital, and the Internet? That’s the world we function in, but it’s invisible.

SINCE THE CONTRACT WITH AMERICA IS ESSENTIALLY A PROMISE OF WHAT THE STATE WILL DO, AND IN YOUR THIRD WAVE WORLD THE STATE WILL DO LESS, I IMAGINE A THIRD WAVE CONTRACT WITH AMERICA WOULD BE VERY SHORT.

In fact, yes. We have to decide what are the minimal requirements we need from the central government.

WHAT DO YOU PERSONALLY SUGGEST AS THE MINIMUM?

The key is the Bill of Rights and protection of human rights within society. We should also, I think, agree that we need to continue the separation of powers.

SINCE THE AMERICAN BICENTENNIAL, IN 1976, YOU'VE BEEN ADVOCATING AN OVERHAUL OF THE US CONSTITUTION. DON'T YOU REALIZE THAT IS SACRILEGIOUS?

We need to completely reconsider the structure of the Constitution. This is regarded as heresy. Wonderful as the document is, and it is, we're straining all of its provisions judicially to make it fit changed realities. A good example is the cyberporn issue. Does the state have the right to keep cyberporn regulated, and does it have the capability given the new technology? We should take the next 10 or 20 years to have a civilized, national discussion of what a 21st-century democratic Constitution would include.

WHAT IS THE PROCESS FOR RETHINKING THE CONSTITUTION? WE CAN'T REALLY HAVE A TOWN HALL MEETING OF 250 MILLION. WE KNOW THAT DOESN'T WORK.

Well, many states have constitutional conventions and they don't blow apart. If I'm not mistaken, Hawaii still has a requirement for what it calls a Con Con, a constitutional convention, every 10 years. America is so diverse that we don't need one big national constitutional convention. What we want are thousands of groups discussing alternatives.

ARE YOU OPTIMISTIC THAT DEMOCRACY WILL THRIVE IN CYBERSPACE?

What we have now is a form of democracy that is mass democracy, which is the political expression of mass production, mass distribution, mass consumption, mass education, mass media, mass entertainment, and all the rest. And what's happening is that society is becoming more demassified, more heterogeneous, and it is therefore harder and harder to arrive at a majority on an issue. And when you do, it's frequently just an artifact of the voting system rather than an expression of the organic beliefs of the population. So we believe that there are very deep difficulties for mass democracy in the era of diversity, which is being propelled by the computer revolution.

WOULD YOU SAY THAT DEMOCRACY IS ALSO UNDERGOING A REVOLUTION?

I think we should attempt to devise new forms of democratic practice that can handle the levels of complexity and speed our society requires. You could have 535 saints and geniuses in the House and Senate and they would still make stupid decisions. The reason is the current process was never designed to operate at this level of complexity and speed.

DO YOU THINK WE'LL GET TO THE POINT WHERE EVERYONE VOTES ON EVERY ISSUE BY CLICKING ON A FORM ON THE WEB?

We don't need to be trapped between the polar arguments that either all decisions are made by the people without any representative institutions, or alternatively, that they all are made by supposedly representative institutions. There are many ways we can use the new technology to combine these - representative and direct - to take advantage of both. We call this semidirect democracy.

SO WHAT ABOUT ELECTRONIC VOTING?

The political system is a collective decision-making process; it's a feedback system. One of its parts is the voting process. The voting process, given the limitations of communication information at the time of the writing of the Constitution, is a batch process. Every two years, every four years, every six years, we vote. The public feeds into the system as a batch process. If, however, you look at those much maligned "special interests," they are a continuous process. They act on the system 365 days a year, 24 hours a day. So you've got two sources of influence on the system, one that is continuous and one that is intermittent and not even frequent. So, first of all, would it be advisable for others to adopt the continuous-flow style of the special interests? And secondly, is there a way to involve large numbers of people in continuous-flow balloting?

YOU COULD ALSO IMAGINE A NETWORK MODEL IN WHICH WE GET AWAY FROM BATCH MODE IN TAXES AND BUDGETS.

That's our proposal. In fact, we suggested the following: every tax form allow every taxpayer to allocate one percent of his or her taxes. You would be able to allocate that 1 percent among the different governmental functions. So maybe you want more given to health and less given to the Pentagon or maybe the reverse. Now when the IRS tallies that up at the end of the month, what it has, in fact, is a citizens budget. Our slogan is, No allocation without representation. And we could do this, by the way, not just at the federal level but at municipal, county, and state levels.

THIS IS ALL VERY FUTURISTIC. BUT IN THE PAST YEAR, THE FUTURE HAS BEEN THE PUNCHING BAG FOR BOTH PARTIES. READ AT THE LEVEL OF USA TODAY, PEOPLE ARE REJECTING THE FUTURE.

For sure. The Democrats are trapped by teachers unions and the standard bureaucracies and political campaigns. Everybody knows that the educational system is a scandal. So no matter how many times Gore and Clinton talk about the need for better education, the frame of reference with which they think about it has to be acceptable to existing political forces. And the same goes for the Republicans.

BY THAT LOGIC, WOULD YOU HYPOTHESIZE THAT A LEADER OF A SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN TO CHANGE THE FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURE OF POLITICS WOULD HAVE TO COME FROM OUTSIDE THE GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS?

Leadership is going to come from very strange places.

OK. LET'S SAY THAT GOD WAS GOING TO PUNISH YOU AND MAKE YOU RUN FOR PRESIDENT IN 2000. WHAT'S ON YOUR PLATFORM?

First, we have to look outward; isolationism is idiotic. Second, information and knowledge are the source of the well-being of the population; they are the source of the future and at least the material well-being of the people. Therefore, it is the Number One priority to liberate education from the factory model.

PLAYING ALONG WITH THIS FANTASY, AT YOUR PRESS CONFERENCE, A REPORTER FROM WIRED NOTES THAT YOU'VE BEEN ON THE RECORD TALKING ABOUT LETTING THE JAPANESE DIET HAVE A SEAT IN CONGRESS. TRUE?

Yes. That always gets a response. The argument is partly, of course, tongue-in-cheek. But there is a serious purpose behind it. First, if you believe in democracy, one of the principles of democracy is that you should have some say in the decisions being made that influence your life. Well, the decisions being made in the Japanese Diet affect American lives very deeply, but we do not have any formal representation in those institutions. So what we've said is not simply that the Japanese ought to be in the American Congress, but also that Americans ought to be in the Japanese Diet.

I BET WE DON'T HEAR PAT BUCHANAN SAY THAT! ONE OF THE THINGS THAT ALWAYS IMPRESSED ME WAS THAT TWO YEARS BEFORE NEWT HIT THE FRONT PAGE, YOU TOLD ME TO PAY ATTENTION TO HIM. YOU SAID HE WAS ONE OF THE FEW PEOPLE IN CONGRESS WHO WAS THINKING 30 YEARS AHEAD. SO WHO ELSE IN POLITICS IS DOING THAT THESE DAYS?

Oh, I don't know. What's happened is they've all allowed themselves to get trapped in the day-to-day step work. I think Newt himself has his head down, and he has been punished by his own party for his willingness to contemplate the kinds of future changes that are essential. The system punishes anybody who talks about the future. The system says, "You're here to produce instant results for whoever the recipient might be, whether it's the public or some lobby." It's now clear the system is geared for immediate reaction to immediate pressures.

THAT'S A VERY DEPRESSING THOUGHT. WHAT WOULD YOU SUGGEST THE READERS OF WIRED DO IN THE INTERIM?

I think the readers of Wired are a unique resource for the country. I think we need discussions of alternative political forms on the Net and elsewhere. We need a repertoire of ideas; we need years, not months, of discussion and debate about alternative political structures that become possible in today's world, and transitional steps that might move us in the right directions. And we need to do that in a framework in which the one prohibition is the prohibition of fanaticism. We don't need passionate commitments to this or that form, because it's way too early. I don't care how smart anybody on the Net is - nobody has all the answers. What we're talking about is such a tremendous leap in the history of governance that there's no single architect, there's no brain that knows the answers to how to do it. We need to take advantage of millions of brains. We need the distributed intelligence in the system for this.

WELL, IF YOU WANT PRIMARILY DISCUSSION WITH NO ACTION, THAT'S WHAT THE INTERNET IS ALL ABOUT.

I believe that's the stage we're at.

MY WORRY IS, HOW DO YOU GET PEOPLE TO STOP DISCUSSING THINGS AND ACTUALLY TRY SOMETHING?

We have powerful forces here. First of all, we've got Third Wave industry. We've got the companies that have a vested interest in advancing the whole move toward an information-based economy. Second, we have all the millions of very smart people on the Net. I think what you want are invisible colleges. And we need to come up with an agenda. That agenda can't be 342 points. It has to be 10 points; that's about as much as we can handle.

WILL PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT ON THE NET, WHO ARE NOT WIRED, BE OPPOSED TO THE CHANGES THIRD WAVE WANTS?

No. Because it isn't just a question of communications and computers. It has to do with institutional structure, decentralization of politics, and a bunch of other issues. De-bureaucratization affects everybody, whether you're on the Net or not.

WILL THE DIGITAL COMMUNITY BE ABLE TO GET WHAT IT WANTS?

I think there's a utopian stream that's going to be quite disappointed when everything shakes out. I mean, not all information on the Net will be free. Moreover, there is a kind of anticorporate, antibusiness extreme within the digital community that sees business as the enemy. And that is just misguided.

WON'T LARGE BUSINESSES BE AFFECTED BY THE SAME FORCES THAT ARE DOWNSIZING THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE?

I believe that microtrade and microcapital are the key elements of the future economy. What the Net implies is that it will be possible for a village in Cambodia to find a tiny crevice of a market in a suburb of Keokuk, Iowa, say, for something that may not be produced anywhere else in the world. The Net will make millions of those kinds of connections possible.

DO YOU REALLY THINK THE WORLD WILL BECOME SYMPATHETIC TO THESE IDEAS?

Oh, these ideas are regarded now as zany, kooky, but I believe that in 10, 15 years, as the entire Internet phenomenon spreads, as more and more young people come into the system, these proposals are going to become mainstream proposals. They're not just going to be regarded as these flaky, digerati ideas. •