Mar. 20, 2009

Somebody bring me an 'essential' meat cleaver

Who would have thought the very essence of the 2009 session of the Nevada Legislature could be encapsulated in the travails of one common Carson City alley cat?

The economic recession is forcing legislators to look at the size and scope of the government which previous Legislatures have built up over the last decade or so and decide whether or not it needs to be shrunk or preserved through higher taxes. So far all we've really heard is how proposed budget cuts would be "devastating" to "essential" government services without anyone actually defining the meaning of "essential."

It all boils down to this: What is the proper role of government?

On that question I tend to agree with libertarian-conservative Thomas Jefferson. "A proper government for Jefferson," explains Wikipedia, "is one that not only prohibits individuals in society from infringing on the liberty of other individuals but also restrains itself from diminishing individual liberty."

Which brings me to "small cat."

About five years ago the stray calico kitten wandered into a coffee shop, Comma Coffee, located directly across the street from the Nevada Legislature. Over the years, Small Cat has become as much a fixture at the business as the various antique tables and chairs occupied daily by average citizens, lobbyists, government officials and politicians.

In fact, Small Cat was "in the house" when such major dignitaries as President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were stumping for votes during the 2007-08 presidential campaign.

And according to one published report, Small Cat is so politically astute that she slept right through Biden's speech.

Alas, Small Cat was recently exiled to Siberia, so to speak, by government apparatchiks.

After five years without a hitch or a problem, some anonymous busybody filed a complaint with the local health department -- which turned around and threatened to yank the coffee shop's business license if the mouse-chasing cat wasn't banished permanently from the premises.

In my opinion -- and I dare suggest Jefferson's, as well -- a government which is able to stick its nose into such a private and trivial matter is simply too big and too powerful.

The thousands upon thousands of Nevadans who own dogs and cats without having their household food supply poisoned by the critters is all the proof I need to conclude that Small Cat poses no community health hazard to the citizens of Carson City. At best, the only legitimate role of government in this matter might be to require that the owner post a warning sign on the door alerting patrons of the presence of the cat. But that's it.

Proprietor June Joplin has it exactly right when she says there's a simple solution for anyone who doesn't like Small Cat hanging out at Comma Coffee: Starbucks.

"As a business owner," Joplin explains, "I should be able to decide how I want to run this business. If people don't like it, they can go elsewhere. This is about one small cat, but it's about so much more."

Exactly. Joplin isn't infringing on the liberties of anyone else, and no one else has a "right" to drink coffee in her coffee shop. And by threatening to shut down Joplin's business despite the fact that she's not infringing upon anyone else's rights is a clear case of the government diminishing her property rights.

Jefferson would not approve.

If this is the sort of "essential" government service everyone is talking about at the Legislature this year, somebody bring me a meat cleaver.

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