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EAGLETON'S CALL TO "DEFRINGIFY" THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

When Senators decide to retire, they seem to attain a status of elder statesman and often give frank advice to their party. Many were shocked, a couple of years ago, when retiring Senator Paul Tsongas (D-MA) admitted that the 1978 reduction in the capital gains tax (which he, as a good Democrat, voted against) did more to create jobs in his state than any Democratic Party social-welfare program.

The latest to join the ranks of Senators Emeritus who counsel their party is retiring Senator Thomas F. Eagleton (D-MO). In series of blunt-talking speeches, he has called on the Democratic Party to "defringify" itself; that is, to stop catering to special-interest groups and to try to "mainstream" itself again.

At his Jackson Day dinner speech in April, Eagleton reminisced about the Democratic Party in the "good old days" of Harry Truman and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Politics were then very simple, he said. You just got to know the Democratic bosses, did "traditional courthouse campaigning," and rose through the ranks by showing you were a team player.

Eagleton then groaned, "My, how things have changed." He related how special-interest groups each have their own "litmus-paper" test, demanding "100%, unflinching fidelity." The result is that, "As a party we don't mean much to the people at large, especially young people. 'Happy Days Are Here Again' [F.D.R.'s campaign song] may turn on the geriatric crowd, but doesn't do a damn thing for an 18-year-old."

Take the labor unions, he said. He told how Fritz Mondale was intimidated into silence. He never delivered a major speech on industrial policy because he was afraid that some part of the AFL-CIO might not like some part of the speech.

Take the blacks, Eagleton said. He criticized "the attempts of any one black leader to impose a personal agenda or personal whims on the Democratic Party and its platform." Eagleton is enough of a politician to refrain from naming any black leader who might fit that description, but it was notable that he said it at all.

Take the National Organization for Women which, Eagleton said, has its own "100%

litmus test. You have to be for government-funded abortions." Again, Eagleton refrained from naming names, but he might have pointed out that this group's shrewish demands were why Mondale had to pick pro-abortion Geraldine Ferraro (D-NY) to be his running mate in 1984 instead of anti-abortion Governor Martha Layne Collins (D-KY) or anti-abortion Congresswoman Lindy Boggs (D-LA).

Take the Hispanic caucus whose litmus-paper test, Eagleton said, is opposition to the Simpson-Mazzoli bill. Eagleton said the majority of Democrats favor this bill because they recognize the urgent need to stop illegal immigration. But those who are "wrong" on Simpson-Mazzoli are barred from consideration for the national ticket.

Eagleton correctly concluded that "each constituency demands absolute perfection, total adherence to each part and subpart of its ever-growing agenda. And you end up with a party that cannot win in the nation as a whole."

That's right, Senator Eagleton; that's exactly where you end up. That was the perception of the average citizen, after watching the Democratic National Convention on television in San Francisco in 1984.

You could have added a number of other groups, such as the homosexuals and the freezeniks, which successfully crammed their own agenda items into the Democratic National Platform. Eagleton admitted that it was "a cockamamy platform that is unintelligible."

In a follow-up speech in St. Louis in May, Senator Eagleton elaborated on his call to "defringify" the Democratic Party. He said that "television is the whole game today" and urged his fellow Democrats to learn from the "magical" President Reagan.

Here, however, Eagleton is off target. Ronald Reagan's magic is not that he knows how to take advantage of a photo opportunity or is skillful in reading off the teleprompter. Reagan is successful because he speaks to the heart and soul of America. He speaks to our respect for the work ethic and a growth economy of opportunity for all. He speaks up for traditional family, moral, and patriotic values.

Defringifying would be an important first step for the Democratic Party. But the party won't rise out of its minority status unless its leaders learn that the secret of Reagan's success is what he says, not how he says it. Reagan's conservative agenda is mainstream America today, not because of television, but in spite of the hostility of the TV networks.