

Time To Rethink The Relevance Of Rural America?



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Rural Americans need new alliances with urban and suburban interests if they are ever to regain the political clout they enjoyed in the past. That’s one of the central themes expressed by Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack during a series of December speeches – one that stirring new discussions and debates about the future of agriculture and more broadly, Rural America.

The former Iowa Governor and presidential candidate said that rural areas today lack the influence that they enjoyed in the 1930s when rural voters “could defeat or elect a president.” Much of that, of course, stems from the fact that rural population is declining. The latest U.S. Census data indicates that over 56 percent of rural counties have lost population, compared to only 18 percent in metro areas.

Regaining political relevance “must be addressed by rural Americans,” he said. “They need to develop new partnerships” to win adequate public support for rural growth, Vilsack said during a speech at the Farm Journal Forum in early December.

“It is often hard to get attention for agriculture in this town,” he told participants gathered at a U.S. Chamber of Commerce event in a mid-December for yet another Washington-based speech – echoing the long-standing annoyance felt by many in farm and rural areas who believe that the rest of the country does not appreciate their contributions.

He regretted the “lack of appreciation in this country for what happens in rural America . . . the place where our values are rooted. “Some have created a defensive and reactive response” to the lack of understanding of the importance of agriculture, he said, adopting “a preservation mentality – let’s hang on to what we have. If we have that mentality, how is it that we make the case for young people in rural areas if we are constantly telling them how bad it is.”

In addition, Vilsack’s theme seems to stem partly from his own frustration that the Obama Administration’s efforts at USDA and throughout the Cabinet over the last four years failed to persuade the overwhelming majority of rural people to switch from their traditional Republican voting patterns for president and Congress. Rural Americans overwhelmingly voted for Mitt Romney and over two million fewer Democrats voted for the President Barack Obama in 2012 than in 2008. Vilsack’s frustration undoubtedly includes his wife, Christie, who was defeated in her November congressional race by incumbent Republican Steve King in western Iowa.

I couldn’t agree more with some of Secretary’s comments and, in some of my own recent speeches, have been making a few of the same points about the need for those of you in agriculture to broaden your political outreach. It’s no secret that the average age of farmers across this country is slightly over age 57 and likely to increase when the next U.S. Census data is available. There is an urgent need bring more young people back to the countryside and repopulate rural regions of our country.

I know that this can be a prickly issue for many of you who live on farms and small towns. I recently visited with friends who live in a North Dakota county where there are literally more cows than people. Their already consolidated school district is looking at shutting down more buildings and bussing their declining number of students even further.

Ironically, this county had an opportunity to bring a large livestock operation into the area, which would have added jobs for families who could have worked there and brought their children to the local school district. But many in this small town that was largely settled by German and Norwegian immigrants could only see the negatives of “new people,” which is shorthand for “people not like us” and they complained about the potential for more trucks on the roads. By focusing on keeping things the same, they failed to see any of the positive eco-

nomie development the operation could have brought to the area.

After listening to these comments, I was reminded of a former rural economic development official who once told me: “A lot of these small town leaders only want their small towns to survive one day longer than they do.” Ouch!

If that’s really the case in your local community, maybe there is nothing to be done. But my experience demonstrates otherwise. There are hundreds of other success stories across Rural America where farmers, entrepreneurs and small town leaders have worked together to create jobs and bring people back to their counties. Those can be the same jobs that allow young people to build up equity that they can later invest in starting farming.

For example, the Kansas Farm Bureau has focused on rebuilding rural economies and the Kansas Department of Commerce has a web site devoted to small town success stories: <http://www.kansascommerce.com/index.aspx?NID=473>

Another interesting effort to highlight rural success stories can be found at Nebraska Rural Living <http://www.nebraskaruralliving.com> It’s the brainchild of two sisters, Betty Sayers and Nancy Herhahn, who returned to their small town roots after a life pursuing their dreams in big cities. Their mission is to “market the very real benefits of a rural lifestyle,” especially to people who grew up in the South Platte region and moved away. They highlight the amenities of rural communities and spotlight successful entrepreneurs, “who make good livings, free of the stress of urban environments” and offer lots of helpful links on their web sites.

In the county where I grew up in eastern Iowa, there is probably no better example of innovation and entrepreneurship than Jon Kinzenbaw. He started with a small welding shop in Ladora, Iowa in 1965 and now hires almost 800 people who build planters and other types of farm equipment as part of Kinze Manufacturing.

Rather than focusing on the problems in rural America and coming across with a tone that former USDA official Bruce Knight said seemed to be “scolding” farmers and rural residents, Secretary Vilsack should be highlighting these community leaders and others as examples of what’s working. Maybe he should spend more time talking to more global industry leaders, like Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, who reportedly wants to start building more of their components in the U.S. Let’s find out why innovative firms like Apple can’t put a factory in Rural America? Then, perhaps we can figure out what, if any, government role exists for helping people rebuild rural communities.

Indeed, Vilsack seemed to make this transition in both message and tone during his third and most recent Chamber of Commerce speech where he focused more on the innovations in food and agriculture and the wide-ranging opportunities for young people – providing a much more upbeat perspective.

“There is an unlimited opportunity in America, that – there is a rebirth that can take place in rural America. There is a proactive and optimistic and innovative and creative message that can be conveyed to those who are considering an opportunity in rural America,” Vilsack explained.

Reacting to some of Vilsack’s comments, Former Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman and former USDA Chief of Staff Randy Russell penned an opinion piece that really drove the key points home.

“This is an amazing time to be involved in U.S. agriculture. If agriculture were a stock on the New York Stock Exchange, we would recommend a “strong buy” due to the fundamentals discussed above,” they wrote. “In the 1960’s movie “The Graduate”, Dustin Hoffman was given career advice to go into “plastics”. Today we would give the unqualified advice to young people, urban and rural, to go into “food and agriculture”. That is where the future lies.” Δ

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