

SHOULD WE KICK THEM ALL OUT?

by Vic Berecz

Trader Fred, that long-time Vermont resident who can't live down being a *flat-lander* up there and can't stand being called a citizen of the *People's Republic of Vermont* down here, said to me recently: "Democrats, Republicans, it doesn't matter. We should kick them all out and start over." Really Trader? If that happened, in the words of columnist Charles Walsh, Washington would be populated by folks "who have boundless enthusiasm and total ignorance of how government works." So I said: "It would take decades to rebuild the systems needed for effective government." "That's fine by me," the Trader countered. A couple of decades of anarchy ... or the lousy system we've got! Isn't there a happy medium?

OK, I could start with a bunch of common sense adages like "Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater." But I won't. Let's ask first who is advocating getting rid of all incumbents, whether they're Democrats or Republicans? It's mostly the *Tea Party* folks ... and remember, there are no Tea Party incumbents. No argument, "kick 'em all out" makes perfect sense for them! Instead, why don't we address the question of incumbency from a broader perspective.

I suspect most thinking people would agree that there are many good, honest, dedicated members of Congress from both parties. Also, there are a few real stinkers. In between we have a few that simply have been around too long. Have you read my piece *On Aging and Knowing When to Quit*? I suggest that "someone tells me when it's time to quit" ... well, hopefully the electorate will tell these folks their time is past. Then there are other members of Congress (and they come in both red and blue shades) who are basically useless hangers-on who keep getting elected by kowtowing to their constituency. Well, I guess, those voters – like all the rest of us Americans – have the right to elect whoever they want. So what's a happy medium for dealing with all these very different groups of incumbents? I've got two suggestions.

The first thing we have to do is minimize the advantage of incumbency ... that is, level the playing field. An incumbent will almost always have a *name recognition* advantage, there's not a lot we can do about that. But, we can do something about the *gerrymandering* of districts to virtually ensure that a particular party or candidate wins that district. The proposed amendments 5 and 6 to the Florida constitution would require that districts be reasonably contiguous, compact, and follow local government boundaries is a step in the right direction. I'd also propose that local and state law make it easier for third party or NPA (no party affiliation) candidates to qualify. This, in the current environment, would give a voice to moderates who are rejected by the "core constituency" of both the Democratic and Republican parties. Finally, something needs to be done about the ever-increasing cost of political campaigns. There must be a way for candidates without huge personal fortunes or who aren't beholdin' to special interests to effectively participate. Shorter campaigns and rational public funding could make a difference here. And just think, if we didn't force our Congress to be in perpetual campaign mode, they would have more time to do what they were elected to do ... legislate.

My second suggestion stems from the last point above. When can a candidate spend all their efforts on doing the best possible job? When they are lame-ducks! Therefore having a significant number of lame-ducks in Congress all the time is a good thing. How do we get there? Term limits. Unfortunately, in 1995 the Supreme Court ruled that state law could not impose term limits on Congress. While the federal Constitution could be amended to impose term limits, the likelihood of getting a 2/3 majority of Congress to go along is low. Visit www.termlimits.org for more information on the status of term limit efforts. At the moment the best we can do is demand from our candidates a *term-limit pledge*. As for those career politicians who renege on their pledge, let's kick them out. "Voting is the peaceful revolution."