

OCPA FaxLine Report

a public policy information service for members of the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, Inc.

Dear OCPA Member:

Thursday, August 21, 2008

The last many weeks I have been writing about “warmed-over” public policies which some liberals (ironically, calling themselves “*progressives*”) are attempting to reintroduce to the policy arena. Now remember, the policies I’ve been writing about have been tried and have failed miserably. This week’s warmed-over policy from another time is one of the scariest. It’s called the Fairness Doctrine. Liberals want to reintroduce the policy but no doubt they will do so under another name.

The original Fairness Doctrine was introduced in 1949. The doctrine required broadcasters to provide time to opposing viewpoints. But broadcasters felt “policing” viewpoints was intrusive so they pulled the plug on all such discussion. Rather than hearing more about the issues of the day, the public heard less. In 1987 the Reagan administration ended the practice. James L. Gattuso, senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation says now liberal advocacy groups such as Free Press and the Center for American Progress are proposing a more intrusive policy, which includes:

- Strengthened limits on how many radio stations one firm can own, locally and nationally;
- Shortening broadcast license terms;
- Requiring radio broadcasters to regularly show they are operating in the "public interest;"
- Imposing a fee on broadcasters who fail to meet these "public interest obligations" with the funding to go to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

As Gattuso states, “The goal of the reforms is the same as the Fairness Doctrine: to reduce the influence of conservative talk radio. Limiting ownership, the authors believe, will eliminate many of the owners who favor conservative causes. Public interest requirements can be defined almost any way a regulator wants -- up to and perhaps even beyond that required by the old Fairness Doctrine. And the proposed fee provides regulators with a quite effective stick to compel compliance -- as well as to direct funds to more ideologically compatible public broadcasters.”

As Brian Fitzpatrick of the Media Research Center’s Culture and Media Institute notes, “Thomas Jefferson said ‘To compel a man to subsidize with his taxes the propagation of ideas which he disbelieves and abhors is sinful and tyrannical.’ Government compulsion of speech is a form of taxation for commercial broadcasters, and for all of us it’s a threat to one of our most cherished civil liberties, freedom of speech.” And just a few days ago, FCC Commissioner Robert McDowell cautioned that the reinstatement of the Fairness Doctrine (or something like it) would be intertwined with the debate over net neutrality, presenting a danger that content controls will expand to the Internet. He’s concerned this could lead to "government dictating content policy.” Sounds rather Marxist, *err* . . . I mean “progressive” now doesn’t it?

Until next time. . . Brett A. Magbee, Vice President for Operations

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