

Lexington

How the shutdown plays in Peoria

Anytown, USA is not impressed by the farce in Washington

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IN THE vaudeville era the test of a new act was: “Will it play in Peoria?” If a variety show prompted frowns and fidgeting in this city in Illinois, it was doomed nationwide. Peoria is a stolid spot, built on such industries as whiskey and tractors. A post-war influx of factory workers, lured by such firms as Caterpillar, maintained its status as Anytown, USA. For years all kinds of products were tested there, from disposable nappies to burgers.



Market researchers have moved on, chasing more diverse consumers elsewhere. But unflashy, middle-of-the-road Peoria still offers a window onto American politics. Though the country feels increasingly divided along party lines, most Americans are not die-in-a-ditch partisans. Peoria embodies such scepticism. In the 2012 presidential elections the city and surrounding county backed Barack Obama over Mitt Romney by 51% to 47%, perfectly matching the nationwide popular vote. In the Illinois legislature, greater Peoria is represented by two Democrats and two Republicans. In Washington, DC Peoria is served by two members of the House of Representatives. Its wealthier northern suburbs help elect Aaron Schock, a young Republican. Its grittier, more African-American south is served by a Democrat, Cheri Bustos.

In Peoria, the vaudeville antics in Washington are playing badly. A recent morning found Lexington at the 12th-floor studios of WMBD, a conservative talk-radio station, as the rising sun gilded the city’s stubby skyscrapers, river and factory roofs. Angela from Princeville called to renounce her support for the Republican Party on air, declaring herself at once an independent and “so darn crazy” at Congress and President Obama. Like many callers, her rage focused on the idea that members of Congress are “exempt” from Obamacare. (It’s more complicated. Lawmakers noisily promised to use a hair-shirt version of Obamacare but then clawed back fat subsidies they have always enjoyed.) “They are all kings up there, and we’re the little people,” thundered Angela. Other

callers wanted to cut congressional pay, and snickered that furloughed federal workers are on “paid vacations”.

Republicans should fret that no caller blamed the mess squarely on the Democrats. But Mr Obama’s party should worry, too. In a straw poll most Peorians blame both parties for the gridlock. Peoria is a sleeves-rolled, get-it-done sort of place, affronted that politicians can fail to do their job and face no consequences. The mayor, Jim Ardis, is a fiscal conservative. But he has no truck with Republicans who dream of repealing Obamacare. Be realistic, he urges: work to fix it, not kill it. Absolutism leaves no “room to govern”: politics is never winner-takes-all.

Peoria is rather socially conservative. Even trade-union types cherish the right to carry guns. Peoria County’s elected sheriff, Michael McCoy, sympathises (as befits a man who wears a hefty pistol inside his suit). But, unlike sheriffs elsewhere, he has no intention of flouting new gun-control laws. That would be “unproductive”, he growls. Peorians “want things to work”.

Fiercer views can be heard. Dave Schielein, the owner of a local excavating firm, urges Republicans to concede nothing until they can win a “bona fide American election”, sweep Democrats from power and destroy Obamacare, which he calls a socialist-Marxist abomination. But in Peoria frustration is more common than rage. The mess in Washington feeds a “general disgust” with politics, worries Mary Ardapple, head of the chamber of commerce and a bakery owner. That feeds apathy, except on the fringes, making it hard to recruit candidates for school boards and county posts. Several locals describe the same fantasy, in which congressional leaders and Mr Obama are locked in a room until they compromise. Bigwigs from both parties hail the moderate Republicans who long dominated local politics: Senator Everett Dirksen, who helped pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964; Robert Michel, who as House minority leader worked closely with his Democratic opposite number, Tip O’Neill; or Ray LaHood, a congressman for Peoria until he joined Mr Obama’s cabinet.

The curse of gerrymandering

Alas, if Peoria’s centrism is clear, the same cannot be said of the city’s two congressional seats: Illinois’s 17th and 18th districts. Democrats rammed through a gerrymandered electoral map in 2011 (partly in response to Republican gerrymandering elsewhere). Mr Schock describes a call from the Illinois state senate president, explaining that—to avoid wasting Democratic votes on his seat —“We’re going to give you a nice, safe Republican district”. Mr Schock duly gained what he calls a “hyper-partisan” district. It sprawls and twists in the shape of an impressively-antlered moose. The 17th became slightly more compact when redrawn in 2011, but more safely Democratic.

Surprisingly, Mr Schock and Mrs Bustos criticise gerrymandering, though on paper it suits them. Both link today’s dysfunction in Washington to the prevalence of districts so safe that members worry more about the activists who choose party candidates than about the general electorate. In

such a world aisle-crossing is seen as “squishy”, laments Mr Schock. That is not just rhetoric: he faces a primary challenge organised by the Club for Growth, a group that wants a flintier conservative to represent the 18th. The group attacks Mr Schock for voting to end earlier budget stand-offs, including the January 1st “fiscal cliff”. He claims to be unworried. But if granted one wish, he would see districts drawn neutrally by computer. Mrs Bustos backs calls from “Yes for Independent Maps”, a campaign group, to put a (worthy but limited) anti-gerrymandering scheme on the Illinois ballot in 2014—though she has not endorsed the scheme itself.

Once again Peoria is a fine place to view America in miniature. Its pragmatic ways are being trampled by partisan purists who do not speak for a majority. Its politicians know what needs fixing. Alas, national power-brokers no longer much heed the mood in Anytown, USA.

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