

A Little Sugar in My Tea, Please

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – March 17, 2013

When protesters boarded three ships under dark of night on the evening of December 16, 1773 to toss 90,000 pounds of tea into Boston Harbor, it sparked an event only later popularized as the “Boston Tea Party.” At the time, it was simply another escalation in the extended power struggle between American Colonists and British Parliament over the taxation authority.

Dating back to the Stamp Act of 1765, Parliament insisted it had the legal right to levy taxes on British subjects living in the American Colonies. Whigs such as Samuel Adams, calling themselves “The Sons of Liberty,” argued Colonists were not subject to British taxes under the British Bill of Rights dating back to 1689, which included the principle that no subject could be taxed without representation in Parliament. And, the Colonists had no such representation.

Ironically, the revolt against the Tea Act of 1773 had nothing to do with higher taxes. The act simply left in place duties that had been levied since 1767 on tea imported to the Colonies. In fact, the act lowered the price of tea, by eliminating duties paid as tea passed through England on the way to America. The uprising that ultimately sparked the American Revolution truly was about representation and the ability to control local affairs locally – not about high taxes.

It is interesting to consider this history in the context of the modern political movement known as “The Tea Party.” At its genesis in 2009, the movement was focused on national politics and especially on grievances against the US Federal Government’s deficit spending. Mixed in, was a populist message that Washington had lost touch with the American people and that the voices of mainstream America were not being heard.

You would be hard pressed to argue literally that Americans are taxed today without representation, since all citizens 18 years or older who have not forfeited voting rights have an equal say in the election of the Representative, Senator, Vice President, and President representing them in Washington. But, if the argument is that those officials have lost touch, then I think there is merit. And, certainly, the case can be made that lobbyists and campaign donors have a representation far greater than what’s given you or me.

I don’t necessarily agree with every policy the Tea Party advocates, but I do believe their notions of accountability in Washington are healthy for America.

Where I take issue, however, is when anger and the “we’ll show you” mentality bleed over into local politics, as it has most recently with the Education SPLOST vote in Newton County. In this case, the government in the crosshairs is our local school board

– friends and neighbors who give their time in the service of our community to build a better future for our children.

It troubles me to read on-line comments (anonymous or signed) stating a need to “send them a message.” I’m bothered by statements from E-SPLOST opponents in the recent debate saying “They will never tell us they have enough money. It is up to us, the voters to hold them accountable by telling them they have enough money.”

I don’t need to send a message through an on-line blog or the ballot box – I can pick up the phone, write an email, or sit down face-to-face with school board members. I know four of them personally. They are friends and neighbors, and they serve all of us.

The same goes for city and county officials. I don’t always agree with them, and they don’t always do what I want. But, representation isn’t doing what I want; it’s taking my wants and needs into account – along with everyone else’s – and making the best possible decisions with available information and the community’s best interests at heart.

I won’t tell my school board they have enough money, nor do I want control of their line item spending. I want them to show they have the community’s interests at heart, take their jobs seriously, and do what they believe is right. I trust them in that. And, when I don’t, I can work to get someone else elected or put myself forward instead.

Yet, board, council, and commission meetings are sparsely attended. And, many seats are filled in uncontested elections. There’s a message in that as well.

The Colonists destroyed the tea because they were denied representation. I elect my local representatives, I have direct access, and I can seek their positions of authority myself. It’s hard to see what’s wrong with any of that.