

Mitchell's Musings 3-16-15: The Symbolic Logic of the Symbol Minded

Daniel J.B. Mitchell

In past musings, we have discussed the decline of unionization – and therefore the frequency of union-management negotiations – and a consequent drop in public understanding of what a negotiation entails. In a repeat negotiation process, there are rituals which experienced parties to the negotiation understand, some of which are symbolic. But at the end of the day, skilled negotiators (are supposed to) keep their eye on eventual goals and outcomes. If symbolic actions and statements get in the way, we have evolved techniques of mediation to reframe issues so that some eventual deal can be reached.

I was recruited to the UCLA faculty as a graduate student at MIT by UCLA Professor Frederic Myers who was visiting MIT at the time. Myers had been a union negotiator just after World War II and he related a story to me. In that era, there was much labor strife as wartime controls were lifted. There were “rounds” of bargaining in various industries in which certain targets – expressed in cents per hour – developed. At one point, there was a round in which a pay raise of 18½ cents per hour became a union target. Union leaders were expected by their members to achieve 18½ cents, regardless of whether that number was appropriate for their unit. In short, 18½ cents became a symbol. The target therefore also became a figure that management wanted to resist, a kind of anti-symbol symbol.

After a stalemate in negotiations was reached by Myers and his management counterpart, they met informally in a bar. Myers proposed that the two of them find a settlement for which he could credibly claim to have won 18½ cents for his union members and his counterpart could credibly claim that the settlement was actually less. With that understanding, a deal was reached. It was “win-win,” before anyone had even heard of that phrase.

The lesson is that it's fine to have symbols *as long as they don't stand in the way of achieving some feasible objective*. If symbols stand in the way of achieving such an objective, negotiators need to find some way around them. Nowadays, when union-management negotiations are rare in the private sector, you generally hear nothing about them in the news media at all. When they do make the news, the accounts take a naïve view that what is said publicly by the parties is what they expect to achieve. Put another way, symbolic speech is taken literally in the news media.

Outside the labor-management context, I have the impression that symbols are taking over at the expense of actual deal making. Either the parties to political disputes have no objective other than promoting their symbols or they don't understand the process of finding an approach so that symbols don't get in the way of goals. In my home state of California, for example, there is at present a drought and so there is a renewed attention being paid to water infrastructure. However, dams have now become symbols in California. Democrats are against them, ostensibly for environmental reasons, even if they are euphemistically called “water storage facilities.” Republicans are for them because, well, Democrats are against them.

Presumably, however, there is a trade-off on a case-by-case basis between the environmental impact of any particular “water storage facility” and reliable water delivery and cost. After much haggling, the legislature put a water bond on the ballot last November which seemingly earmarked certain funds for water storage. That was a good sign; some way was found around the symbol. The bad news is that any

decision on what actually happens to the bond funds – now approved by the voters – is likely to restart the symbolic battle.

You see the same symbolic takeover in Congress over the proposed Keystone oil pipeline. Republicans are in favor of the project. Democrats are opposed. Presumably, however, the pipeline could (should) be evaluated with regard to its environmental costs vs. economic benefits. No one seems especially inclined to do so. The situation repeats with regard to almost every major issue at the federal level.

One interpretation, a plausible one in my view, is that the legislative or Congressional goal is just re-election and that the *partisan* public has, over time, become more interested in symbols than results. Yet polls results suggest that there is a substantial nonpartisan center with aversion to gridlock, state or federal. Congress' favorability ratings, in particular, are low as a result of a sense that it is unable to deal with the nation's business.

There is no doubt that the partisan public likes symbolic behavior. However, there is a growing nonpartisan public that isn't symbol minded. When I examine California's voter registration data, I find that there is a long-term decline in the proportion of the electorate registered as either Democrats or Republicans. The only growth in registration is what is termed "decline to state," i.e., voters registered with no party as their choice, a proportion approaching a fourth. Neither of the major political parties has a simple majority of registered voters although Democrats with 43% have a plurality. (Republicans have 28%, third parties have 5%, and the rest are "decline to state.")

California voters through a ballot proposition a few years ago abandoned partisan primaries and substituted a "top-2" nonpartisan system in which all candidates run in one election regardless of party affiliation. In short, even if folks no longer have frequent labor-management negotiations as potential models for how to reach feasible outcomes when there are conflicts, there is a trend in sentiment – not yet dominant, of course – against the current clash of symbols.