

# Dissent in the herd

Andrew Kemp reviews

## *The Elephant in the Room: Evangelicals, Libertarians and the Battle to Control the Republican Party*

by Ryan Sager (Wiley, 2006, 256 pages)

Ryan Sager's *The Elephant in the Room* ends with an interview with the former Republican Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich.

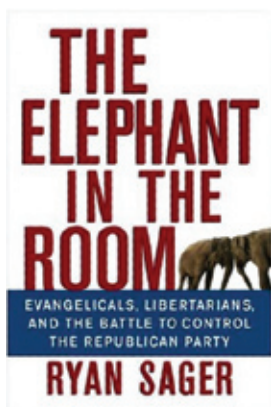
'I think the Republican brand is in trouble', argues Gingrich. 'The party is confused as to its identity'.

Written by a Republican sympathiser, *Elephant* is an attempt to explain what has led to this unfortunate conclusion by Gingrich.

This is a story of constant conflict, a tug-of-war that involves libertarians pulling for individual freedom, economic and social, and the 'Religious Right', pulling for the age-old traditions of 'family, personal safety, and middle class financial security'.

What has kept these two factions, seemingly polar-opposite groups, together? Sager describes it as 'fusionism', a concept originally created by Frank Meyer, a former editor of the *National Review* and libertarian thinker, who saw a role for small government in preserving the moral foundations of society that were so strongly emphasised by the traditional Judeo-Christian thinkers.

This powerful alliance, according to Sager, led to the 'conservative revolutions' of 1964 (Barry Goldwater's presidential



campaign), 1980 (Reagan's ascendancy) and 1994 (the Gingrich-led House of Representatives).

What is now occurring is a political perversion of this fusion, which has given rise to the 'conservative big government' era of George W. Bush. No longer do Republican leaders endorse smaller government as the means to preserve moral values, but instead rely on the biggest increases in federal spending since LBJ, and on programmes and 'reforms' that offer minimal improvement at maximum cost.

Sager calls for a return to the original fusion—the one which worked so well in '64, '80, and '94. The Republican Party thus far has moved 'toward big government and away from small government. Toward politics and away from principle... toward moralism and away from morality.' The party must roll back the moralising of the religious Right and re-embrace a more balanced form of fusionism.

The most notable thing about *Elephant* is the inability of the author to define conservatism properly. This is important, because, in Sager's treatment, both libertarians and traditionalists fall under that label. He makes his strongest attempt in the second last page of the book—'Conservatism, from its

earliest days, has always meant a fusion between liberty and tradition, freedom and responsibility'. But isn't this what the Democrat Party also believes? These generalisations are not pointed enough, and the argument cannot advance because of it. Sager would do well to read Hayek's 'Why I am not a Conservative'.

And yet, if conservatism to the Republicans means compromise on all fronts, then its supporters must accept the fact that they have to work under the compromise insisted upon by the most influential faction at the time. Fusion will always mean balance, but not everyone carries the same measuring stick.

*The Elephant in the Room* is at its best when it details descriptions of Bush's policy failures—the ineffectiveness of the 'No Child Left Behind' reform, the drug benefit reform of 2003 that's estimated to blow out by an extra \$320 billion over 10 years, and the failure to reform social security.

As an attempt to provide a blueprint of the future, Sager is less clear. It doesn't appear to have occurred to him that the original inception of 'fusion' may have laid the groundwork for the party's own destruction, right from the beginning. While Frank Meyer may have thought that liberty and morality went hand in hand, many social conservatives do not. It is no surprise to see libertarians being tempted by the Democratic Party. Why not go with social freedom and big government if the only other alternative is social restriction and big government? Such a conflict was, perhaps, bound to happen.

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