

How to Talk to a Tea Party Activist By [Chuck Collins](#), *The Nation*, April 14, 2010

We'll be hearing a lot about the tea party movement on tax day. They will be angry, and some of that anger at the tax system will be justified.

Like all social movements, the tea party wave is not monolithic. There are hardcore libertarians, white supremacists and partisan Republicans that are not interested in dialogue. But in my conversations with rank-and-file tea party activists, there are important points of common ground.

Many participants have seen their personal economic security devastated by the economic meltdown. They are worried about their tax bills, national debt and the economy their children will inherit. They feel isolated and the tea party is a community.

Here are a few conversation points I've found useful in talking with the open-minded participants at tea party activities:

We Agree

The middle class is overtaxed. After fifty years of major "tax reform" by both political parties, the middle class pays the same percent of income in taxes today as it did in 1960. The very rich (with incomes over \$2 million) pay half as much as they did in 1960 and the [richest 400 households pay two-thirds less](#). Big corporations like ExxonMobil and General Electric have gamed the system so that they pay zero or little taxes.

We are borrowing recklessly from the future, from our children's standard of living. We borrowed to give rich and global corporations tax breaks [and fight two wars](#). In the last eight years, we borrowed \$700 billion to give tax breaks to people with incomes over \$250,000.

The middle class standard of living is under attack. For thirty years real wages have been flat and our economic security has declined. This was masked by people working more hours and taking on unprecedented amounts of personal debt. The economic crisis unmasked how our security was built on a bubble of debt. A job is no longer a source of health insurance or retirement security. We've been told: you are on your own.

Wall Street is squeezing us at every turn. In addition to the government, corporations are also "taxing" us, with their fees, charges and monopoly control over markets. We pay more and more to Visa, Verizon, AT&T, Blue CrossBlue Shield, ExxonMobil, US Airways, etc. These are forms of taxes paid to corporations. They won't stop unless we organize to stop them.

Where We May Disagree:

President Obama is not the enemy. Both major parties have been hijacked by corporate overlords whose first priority is to protect Wall Street financiers and greedy corporations. President Obama is pushing back more than President Bush did, and he had an enormous mess to clean up (he inherited two wars, the Wall Street meltdown and a \$10 trillion national debt). If we demand a government that protects Main Street and ordinary people against organized greed, he will respond.

Scapegoating vulnerable people is a dead end. Our economic problems were not caused by immigrants or low-income people. Wall Street greed in high places is what drove the economy over a cliff. Powerful elites want to distract us by having us fight among ourselves, with racial divides and class wars. Let's not be distracted.

Weak government is not the answer. If we shrink government, who will defend us against Wall Street and the corporate looters? The parts of government that should protect us against Wall Street greed, speculation and the assaults on the middle class have been weakened under both political parties.

Solutions

A fair and accountable tax system. Wealthy people and corporations should pay their fair share and reduce the bite on middle-class taxpayers. We should eliminate tax [dodges](#) that create one tax system for the privileged and another for everyone else.

Reduce national debt and make real investments. We need to pay down our national debt and make long overdue investments in public infrastructure that our small businesses and communities depend on.

Oversight of Wall Street. The financial sector is incapable of policing itself. We need strong public institutions to oversee the [financial markets](#) so that the reckless, greedy and unregulated financial activities that wrecked our economy cannot happen again.

Rein in big corporations. We need a [constitutional amendment](#) to limit the power of corporations to dominate our political process including elections, campaigns and lobbying. This is key to preserving our democracy and liberties.

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About Chuck Collins

Chuck Collins directs the program on Inequality and the Common Good at the Washington, DC-based Institute for Policy Studies and coordinates the [Working Group on Extreme Inequality](#). He is co-author, with Mary Wright, of *The Moral Measure of the Economy* (Orbis). [more...](#)