



Episode 1,466: Think Locally, Act Locally

Guest: Brion McClanahan

WOODS: The tag line of your podcast is “Think locally, act locally,” and that is just going to horrify a lot of people, because of course, we all know it’s “think globally, act locally.” So you’re supposed to be thinking about big ideas and implementing them in your own backyard, that sort of thing. All right, well, that does sound pretty sensible to a lot of people, because we have some global problems, some problems that have global scope, and if everybody’s thinking only of his backyard, he’s not thinking about the effects he’s having on the whole world, let’s say. So` you obviously know what the criticisms of what you’re saying would be. So what’s your fundamental gut-level defense of that tagline?

MCCLANAHAN: Well, yeah, so we’re all taught – and I remember getting this and I’m sure you did in school – from all the environmentalists: we need to think about the plastic that’s running up on islands over in the Pacific there, or we’ve got to think about poverty in India. So what can we do to end poverty in India, or poverty in Africa today in your hometown? And that’s what we should be doing. So it’s more of a look at world geopolitical climate, not just the United States. And I think that, first of all, it’s this international, kind of one-government, *Star Trek* kind of thing, right? We’re just going to have the United Federation of People, and we’re all going to run around in one government. So I think that’s one of the fundamental problems with it.

But in reality – and I tell students all the time. I ask this question when I do government. I say, look, we’re here. All governments are gone tomorrow. So everyone that’s an anarchistic that just heard that on your podcast is saying, “Yes! There it is! It’s utopia. We just have it.” But if you really think that you would miss government, and all governments disappear, what level of government would you miss first? And now, when I ask this question in a class of soldiers, which I have a lot, they would all say, well, the United States government, because that’s where I get my paycheck. But if you were to ask that just about anywhere else, if you were to ask it in Auburn, Alabama, or you were to ask it in Florida, little, small-town Florida, the first thing that they – they might say the general government, but really when they think about it, it’s the local or state government.

They would miss the local government first, because that’s everything, if you think about what government services actually are, what you get out of it. I mean, when you pay your water bill, this is your water. When you pay your trash bill, that’s your trash pickup. When you send your kids out to school, if you send them to the public schools, well, that’s your public schools. If you call the police, 911, I mean, that’s the local police, they’re showing up, or the fire department. They’re the ones that are showing up. So you would miss your local government first.

So where should you focus most of your attention if you want to change things? Does Donald Trump really at the end of the day, other than just fun stuff to talk about, or when I'm when I'm filling out my taxes with the US Congress, do those people really impact me in any way whatsoever? And I think generally, the answer is no. So everything you do in your life is really locally oriented, and so if you want to make a change, if you want to have a better living situation, if your government really — well, think about your local government. If you got 50 people together and you could go protest at the local courthouse about something going on in your town, or you could take 200 people and you could go to the state capitol, well, where would you have more impact? If you took 200 people and went to Washington DC, you would be like little specks on the steps there. They wouldn't pay attention to you. Who cares? But if you go to your local courthouse, they're going to listen to what you have to say. And you might know those people too. I can call my local representative on the phone because I know him. And I can say, "Look, I don't like what's going on here. Let's get this done." And stuff gets done.

So when you think about that whole idea of how you can effect change in your life — and even take that down to the family. Well, what is it you can do at your own family level to make your life better? If you're complaining about, say, filth on television, if that's not something you like, well, then just turn it off. If you don't want to support, you know, take your pick of stupid actor that likes to run their jowls and talk about something ridiculous, well, just don't watch them. I mean, it's that simple. You can make decisions that affect things one little step at a time. And I think that's where I get into this whole idea.

And then of course, we'll get into, I'm sure, the idea of decentralization and all of that stuff, and how that would actually work, but you have to have independence in your own life before you can have any of it anywhere else. And so that really comes down to the local.

WOODS: All right, of course, the American tradition properly understood is supposed to be one of decentralization. That's the whole thing. That's what makes the United States distinct from a lot of other places, was that it's established on that basis. It's established by a group of states, by a group of independent societies. And states in the sense of they're all independent of each other, just as France is independent of — well, Italy would be an anachronism in those days, but you understand the point. They really were states in the proper sense of the word.

And then even beyond that, we have Thomas Jefferson with his proposal for the ward republics, which would take things to an even more local level. And it was thought that's the normal way human beings arrange their affairs. And then you can talk about subsidiarity, which develops this further. All right, so why don't we take this opportunity, then, to say something about federalism, lowercase F, as part of the American tradition?

MCCLANAHAN: Right, so when you go back all the way to 1754, and when Benjamin Franklin proposes what's known as the Albany Plan of Union. And he writes about this. He says, well, nobody wanted to do it, because the colonies at this time were too provincial. They didn't want to be in a union together. They mistrusted each other. Massachusetts didn't trust Virginia, and vice versa. So they didn't like each other. So each one of these little colonies had its own government, it had its own worldview. I mean, it didn't really rely on the others.

And so you move forward into the 1760s when we start getting this conflict with the Empire, and really, that was a constitutional crisis. And it was about the proper role of the imperial power, the British, as opposed to the colonies. And when you look at — this is Jack Greene.

When you look at what's actually happening — he wrote a great book on this, Jack Greene. When you look at what's happening, this is a constitutional crisis over the proper powers of the central authority as compared to the proper powers of the colonies. And all the domestic concerns were supposed to be handled by the colonies, and the only thing the central power could do was defend the colonies and perhaps regulate international trade, but they couldn't tax them directly. They couldn't pass the Stamp Act. They couldn't pass the Currency Act. All these things were just abridging this colonial relationship that they had. And so it really was federalism that we're talking about there.

And then, of course, you get to the American War for Independence, and you've got the fact the Treaty of Paris recognizes each state individually as states. Jefferson said they were states like the state of Great Britain, as you mentioned, in the Declaration. So that was the idea.

Now, James Wilson, who is funny, of Pennsylvania, said that's not true. The Union predated the states. We all know this is just hogwash. I mean, that that wasn't the case. But every state wrote its own constitution. So I mean, why have a central authority when every state has its own constitution? Now, some of the states just kept their colonial charters in New England, but for the most part, every state went out there and they wrote a new constitution. Virginia did this, maybe most famously. So that's important, that understand that we have this structure that's very decentralized. Of course, the Articles of Confederation, the first governing document for the United States recognizes each state in its sovereign and independent character. I mean, it's spelled out.

The Constitution didn't change any of that. And this was clear. When the Constitution was being ratified, it was clear that the way it was sold to the states for ratification: hey, look, we're not changing a thing. The central government has certain powers that are delegated to it, and of course, we're going to have this thing eventually, this Tenth Amendment that expressly says that, but only the powers that are given to the central, that's all we've got. James Wilson of Pennsylvania in the State House yard speech goes out and says this. For the US Constitution, if it doesn't say we can do it, we can't do it. But the states, if it doesn't say you can do it, well, you can do anything you want, but not the central authority. So that's how it was sold.

And of course, we know how it was abused, but that whole principle of federalism really defined the American experience up till the ratification of the Constitution. And then of course, it was eroded over time, but I don't think you can get anything out of early American history but this principle of decentralization.

And remember, less than five years after the Constitution is ratified, Rufus King and Oliver Ellsworth, both of New England, corner John Taylor of Caroline in the Senate and say: *Hey, look, this thing isn't working. Let's get out. We should succeed.* So here you have two people that were part of that process — both Ellsworth and King were very influential members in the process for the Constitution — they both are talking about secession already. We know nullification was born, at least in practice, during the American War for Independence. We're just not going to enforce these stupid Intolerable Acts in Massachusetts. We're not going to do it. That's the Suffolk Resolves. So this is all part of it. In Virginia, you can nullify what the state was doing, or the colony, from the courts. The courts would do this all the time.

So all of this stuff is engrained in America, and I think that's where people miss it when they think it's all about the American nation, we have a national government. It's just completely false. It's not true.

WOODS: Let's take a minute now then to talk about the different theories. I mean, probably I've covered this before, but there's so much material here, the nationalist and compact theories of the Union. And I know we don't like to use compact "theory," when we know it's the compact fact. It's not a theory. All the evidence is there. The evidence exists only for the compact side. The evidence for the nationalist side I could fit on one corner of a cocktail napkin, if even that. So do you want to comment on these and why they matter?

MCCLANAHAN: Well, sure. First of all, we have this idea that we somehow had Federalists and anti-Federalists. It's not true. We had nationalists and Federalists in the ratification process, or as I like to say, proponents and opponents. So when I wrote my *Founding Fathers Guide to the Constitution*, that was the whole point of this, to get into this idea. But the nationalists certainly believed — I mean, this is James Madison now with the Virginia Plan. Early in the Philadelphia convention, he says, look, we need a national government. Everything was going to be centralized. And that was explicitly rejected. We have to remember that this plan of a national government was outright rejected in Philadelphia. And so when the Constitution is being sold, that's one of the main sticking points, right? Is it going to consolidate power? And the proponents, the friends of the Constitution, keep saying no, no. No, it's not going to consolidate power. This is a federal system.

So the nationalist position is simply expressed I think best by Alexander Hamilton, John Marshall, and Joseph Story. And John Marshall famously in *McCulloch v. Maryland* really is where he lays this out when he says: look, yeah, so we ratified the Constitution in states, but how else are we going to do it? There was no other way to do it. So the people ratified it, but they had to do it in the states, because this is the only place they could have these conventions. Well, is that true? I mean, did they not just call a Philadelphia convention where all the states met? Could they not have done the same exact thing and had one big convention, a national convention where they could have ratified it? But no, and we know in Article VII of the document, it says that this is a "Constitution between the States" — not the people, but between the states — "so ratifying the same."

All the evidence is there, but Marshall is coming up with this ingenious way to defend nationalism, and that becomes codified in that decision. And then Joseph Story is going to defend it incessantly in his *Commentaries on the Constitution*. And of course, every lawyer in the 19th century read this thing. Every judge read it. Even to this day, you have at the Heritage Foundation, I think, the Joseph Story lectures. I mean, Joseph Story is considered to be an originalist, and here's a guy saying, we have one people. We just have one people. We're all the American people. We're just one mass of people. And this is where people like Abel Upshur and John Taylor would say this is just bunk. There's nothing to it. You can't make that claim based on the evidence.

So the nationalists are building all of this on a house of cards. And then James Wilson famously writes his own Declaration of Independence. I don't know if you remember, this was a big deal. A copy of the Declaration had been found over in England, and it was the James Wilson version of it, the broadside. And what he did is he removed all the states from the signer, so it just looked like all these people signed. They didn't sign by state. He takes out the fact that, of course, voting for the Declaration was by state, not by individual. He

conveniently leaves that out. But I mean, you just have all these people signing it. It's all the work of the people. The union predated the states because it says "these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be," but it's simply just – the history doesn't work, but James Wilson was trying to fabricate this. It's 18th century fake news. It's what it was. So all the side of the nationalists, as you said, can be fit in a very convenient argument: we have one people, and that's it, because the people created the Constitution, not the states. And it's just simply not true.

WOODS: Why does this matter? What difference does it make? I bet some people think this is just arguing about nothing. Why does it matter which one of these is right?

MCCLANAHAN: Well, it still matters today because of because of the influence of nationalism in federal policy. And I mentioned this yesterday, but when you have a system where you have one size fits all, and let's say, again – I mean you can be on the right or the left. It doesn't matter. We'll say we're rabid leftists. We hate Donald – I mean, we have Trump derangement syndrome bad. Just everything that guy does, the guy's been colluding with Russia. The guy's been out there. He's the orange man. He's favoring all these evil people with unacceptable ideas. I mean, this is a guy that just is despicable. So we've got to get rid of him. And to boot, he's passing legislation that we don't like. He's signing stuff – I mean, of course, side note: how many things do the Republicans actually do when they control the Congress and the presidency? Virtually nothing. But anyways, so he's doing all these things we don't like, and we've got to get rid of him.

Why are they so angry about that? Because we have all this focal point, a laser-beam focus on the executive branch and the central authority. If we had real federalism, Donald Trump wouldn't matter. So if you were a leftist, Donald Trump would be the last thing on your mind. You could have your little socialist utopia in California or Vermont. I mean, you could be wearing your Birkenstocks in Vermont every day, listening to Phish and using your patchouli oil or whatever you're doing up there in Vermont, and you could have the best green utopia you want. Or out in California, you could have the sanctuary state of the world. You can invite every immigrant of the world into California, and you could all have them live there, and it wouldn't matter. Trump couldn't affect you.

On the other hand, if you're on the right, and you've got Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and she's promoting this Green New Deal and all this stupid stuff that she does, that wouldn't even be on your radar, because the Congress couldn't do these things. It would just be simple. The states would do all that stuff. Congress couldn't do any of these things. So what would it matter? I would be free in my state of Alabama to not worry about the Green New Deal. You could be free in Florida or Kansas or Montana, wherever you are, that you wouldn't have to worry about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

And wouldn't that make for a much more peaceful political environment? I mean, who would really care who's president at that point? The President's powers would be circumscribed. They wouldn't have the power of the pen to do whatever they want. This would be fantastic. And I think that's where this idea of nationalism versus federalism works in the 21st century. That's why this debate still matters, going all the way back to the founding periods. It's why I wrote *How Alexander Hamilton Screwed Up America*, because it's important to point the direction where did it start, where did the blueprint begin, and then how did we get to where we are today, which is disastrous for real, effective federalism and lack of political conflict in America.

WOODS: Now, here's the natural objection, which is that sometimes there are bad things that go on at the local level, and so it's good to have a higher level that can intervene and put a stop to that. And so you what you are advocating is a system that may sound attractive in the abstract, but in the way it's really lived can perpetuate various forms of local oppression.

MCCLANAHAN: Well, I mean, that's true. Look, all government has potential for oppression. It doesn't matter what level you're talking about. But at the end of the day, the local governments would more accurately reflect the political culture of the area than, say — look, when somebody — and again, because you're from Massachusetts in growing up. So you're in Massachusetts. Can you imagine all of your friends, you're sitting around in high school, and you're debating: should the Alabama legislature be able to legislate for Boston, Massachusetts? I mean, those hayseeds down there, they don't believe in a lottery. They've got some really restrictive policies on social issues, whatever it is. And would you want to be debating if that would happen? Or would you like a government that reflects the political culture of Massachusetts?

And you can say, well, it's going to be repressive, but that's repressive, from the outside in. The Puritans, did the Puritans consider their government to be oppressive? If you're in that culture, they certainly didn't. It was just part of their society. So I think that's where you get into that. I mean, this is from the outside looking in. It's other people saying, well, that government's oppressive. So don't live there. And not just that. When you look at the state constitutions, they all have protections on these things now. Every state constitution has a bill of rights. Now, some are different than others, but you can always appeal to your state constitution. And I think we've gotten to the point in society where we don't have the same type of views that we did, say, 200 years ago, and thankfully so on things that would be problematic to civil liberties. So I would say that today, that wouldn't be an issue as much as it might have been a couple of years ago.

WOODS: One of the benefits, let's say — I'm not sure that's the right word — of this way of thinking is that it lets people feel like they have some measure of control over their lives. That is to say, if I were to say to you, "Go out and change the education system in America," you wouldn't even know where to begin. It's impossible. How would you do that? But if you could make some improvement in your local community and that were your goal, you would think that was at least plausible. And so the idea of acting locally and thinking in terms of your local environment makes you less discouraged, because you can actually see real effects of your activity.

MCCLANAHAN: That's exactly right. I mean, think about — well, take two issues that are hot-button topics, often education and healthcare, right? People talk about this all the time. And you look at the Democrat debate, they're talking about how much can they actually give away to people in health care? Well, if you want government health care, just look at the VA. The VA is awful. Nobody wants the VA, really, unless you just want some really basic stuff. But if you have to do anything else, you're kind of sunk.

But you look at states and innovation, I mean, Obamacare is essentially Romneycare, right? So Massachusetts, they had universal health care. And that was Mitt Romney. The states are actors and able to do these things. If you really like socialized medicine, this is for you, well, why does it need to be the entire United States doing this? Why can't you have it in Massachusetts? Or why can't you have it in Alabama? Why can't you have it in California?

And you can affect those areas a lot more easily than you can anywhere else. One of the things that I point to oftentimes is representation. When the Constitution was ratified in 1788, the representative ratio there for Congress was 30,000, to 1. And when you think about that, I mean, this is what Washington said was effective for good representative government, 30,000 to 1. So at that time, you're thinking about, well, we've got 30,000 to 1. He said for a general government of general purposes, or what we had, that's what you would need. The representative ratio today is about 750,000 to 1. So how can you have good government with your constituents when you're representing 750,000 people? It's impossible. But at most of your state levels, you have that representative ratio of, say, 30,000 to 1 or 40,000 to 1. The worst is actually California. Theirs is like 300-something-thousand to 1. But in some places in New England, I think it's in New Hampshire, some areas it's like 5,000 to 1 for your representative ratio. That's great. That's at the state level, not just your local level. That's at the state level. So when you really want to effect change, you can get maybe some health care reforms in your area with your state legislature.

Education. Well, if you don't like the education system, either get elected to the local school board, which is highly possible — I mean, all you've got to do is just put your shoes on and go canvas, and you could probably get elected if you had a good enough vision in your community. Or maybe look at private school. If you can't afford that, look at homeschool. Because these are ways that you can change the perspective by doing something in your own backyard, or as they say in the South, sweep around your own back porch, right? Sweep around your own back porch. Worry about what you're doing, and then you're creating people that will go out in the community that will be different, and they can affect the community that way, too.

So it's a positive way you can actually do something about your environment, you can do something about your circumstances, that will change not just where you live, but also change your worldview. It'll make you more positive about things. If all you're worried about is, if I can't change Trump, I'm going to scream at the sky. And think about, I mean, this is where people are really demented. If Trump is going to affect me so much that I'm going to go out and scream at the sky because that's going to ruin my life, well, how so? I mean, if they just thought for a second, if I can take care of something here in Illinois, well, I mean, isn't that going to make me feel better? Of course it would. It's a positive outlook. It's something better, and I think anybody, left or right, could do this, and it would make a much happier population.

WOODS: All right, folks, that in a nutshell is the philosophy of *The Brion McClanahan Show*, which I think it somewhat varies depending on your schedule, but in general, you try to do two episodes a week?

MCCLANAHAN: That's correct. Yeah. I mean, if I'm not overloaded doing something else, I'll do two *Brion McClanahan Shows* a week. And I don't just do it audio. You can also watch it on YouTube, so if you want to subscribe to my YouTube channel and watch it there, you can do that too. So it's a way to actually see me do the show, which some people like that. They just want to watch me. They want to look at my books in the background and see what I've got back there, I guess. So you can do that, too.

WOODS: All right, so BrionMcClanahan.com is the website. Remember McClanahanAcademy.com, where Brion teaches you all the stuff that's in his head there, and you can get 25% discount with coupon code WOODS. What other code would it be? And

tomorrow, it will be a surprise topic. We're going to conclude Brion McClanahan Week. So I hope it's been great for everybody to be exposed to Brion if you haven't heard of him before. It's another good reason to join [LibertyClassroom.com](https://libertyclassroom.com), because Brion also teaches there. And Brion, thanks a lot. We'll see you tomorrow.

MCCLANAHAN: Yeah, thanks, Tom. I appreciate it.