

'Bridging' political divides is more complicated than Matt Jones makes it |

Opinion BY TODD KELLY AUGUST 11, 2023

Linda Blackford asks the question on the 08/06 Herald-Leader Opinion Page; "Can KSR host teach us to bridge political divides?" Ms. Blackford's question is as vexing as it is plain and is a seed with deep dormancy. Or perhaps these divides are mirages and not so troubling after all. Soon after I read the question, I supplied myself with answers and now, after a day or two, I'm lost. In the three words "bridging political divides" is an instant and vexing maze.

She writes about KSR raconteur Matt Jones and his prominence as a media figure and eastern Kentuckian. Jones' commercial appeal and success, apart from his good nature and entrepreneurial instincts, rely in large part on the intense and generations-deep adoration, by Kentuckians, of UK athletics. He takes on five topics to build Linda's bridge: civility on social media, life as a liberal sounding board, liberal contempt (of conservatives), the rural-urban divide, and the art of persuasion. There's some to agree with in his comments but as a whole, they're bromides and too tentative. Below is my attempt to answer Linda's questions and to go where Matt may have declined.

It's nothing original to say that social media is often no more than a wicked combination of anonymity and exploitative computation that devolves quickly into tribal jealousies. That he uses his popularity to communicate his views privately is a bridge.

Matt uses the term "liberal" assuming that we know what he means by it or that the word has a strict definition. It doesn't and the same applies to "conservative". Speaking of his eastern Kentucky neighbors he says he is the "only liberal they know". He might recommend (if he already hasn't); Silas House, Harry Caudill, or the folks at Appalshop.

His comments on LGBTQIA+ folks are puzzling. Does he mean that listeners should not get worked up over people LGBTQIA+ because there's "only one in the state" or that, like he says "...these are human beings whose lives are valuable and who we need to treat with respect"? These are different propositions.

Scorn for what one perceives as your opposite is the domain of both liberals and conservatives and Matt builds a straw man to make his point concerning liberal contempt for conservatives. He explains ridiculing the conservative point of view as one way liberal arrogance. Two wrongs don't make a right and if we must reduce matters to two sides then both could learn some manners.

Matt erects another straw man concerning coal. People in eastern Kentucky know (and are mad about) the fact that the mining industry has benefited the few at the expense of the many. Forget all "liberal" anger, blaming, and ignorance about coal and you still have crimes against eastern Kentucky people, land, and water. He should explain why anyone can't ask questions about these matters. He says, "But then I looked at it a little differently, which was these people never grew up expecting to have anything. And the things that mattered to them, they're seeing slip away." The first sentence, I hope, does not, tell more about him than about the people he claims to know. The second rightly joins rural and urban America in what is a planned and orderly decades-long assault on the middle class that began with Carter and continues with Biden.

Matt's final bridge is a sound one. To share opinions is important, but opinions joined with decency, conviction, and yes, facts is a most digestible and healthy meal.

