

# Transcript

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## The Bill Walton Show

Arnold Kling

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Bill Walton: Welcome. My guest today is Arnold Kling, independent scholar and author of a wonderful book called "The Three Languages of Politics," which we're going to be talking about today.

Arnold is an independent scholar, PhD in economics from MIT. He's a founder of a very successful internet startup, [homefares 00:02:20].com, which he had the good sense to sell in 1999 and has been an independent scholar ever since, so we'll talk with Arnold about that I hope a bit. He's also written a terrific book that we hope to get up to in an upcoming episode, "Specialization and Trade," which is a very interesting take on macroeconomics and what it is and what it isn't and what economics should be. Arnold, welcome

Arnold Kling: Thank you very much.

Bill Walton: So, "Three Languages of Politics," interesting topic, what drove you to write this and what's the source.

Arnold Kling: I noticed several years ago that when I was reading political commentary, it was not designed to open the minds of people on the side of the commentator, and it was really designed to open the minds of people on the other side.

If I looked at it really carefully, what it was trying to do was close the minds of the people on your own side and that seems pretty dysfunctional. So I just started to delve into that and the three languages is sort of a model of how people do that, of how they go about closing the minds of the people on their own side.

Bill Walton: So one alternative for the pundit would be to open the minds of people on their side.

Arnold Kling: That would be a really brave thing to do, yeah.

Bill Walton: Our open the minds of people on the other side.

Arnold Kling: Yeah.

Bill Walton: But instead the close the minds of people on their side?

Arnold Kling: Yeah.

Bill Walton: What's their motivation?

Arnold Kling: I think that ultimately it's what gets them attention and support and status within their tribe.

Bill Walton: Yeah.

Arnold Kling: So the competition leads them to do that. To the extent they try to open the minds of people on their own side, they get hammered by people on their own side and to the extent that they're trying to engage seriously people on the other side, they just don't get any attention at all because people are just very confused. They're so used to the tribal war whoops that they're ... and they're used to hearing these three languages, especially to denounce the other side.

Bill Walton: I guess I've written and spoken about the fact I think politics is almost irretrievably broken and one of the things I wanted to get in today and the thing I'm really interested in is you've got a way, a paradigm really, of a better way for people to engage politically and you mentioned three tribes. What are those three tribes?

Arnold Kling: You have what I call the progressive tribe, what people call Liberals nowadays, and then you have a Conservative tribe and a very small tribe, but I feel closer to that tribe than the others and that's the Libertarian tribe.

Bill Walton: Yeah, I think I'm in that tribe too. There are about 12 of us, aren't there?

Arnold Kling: Yeah,

Bill Walton: Maybe more.

Arnold Kling: And we all expel each other ... we excommunicate each other quite regularly, so there may be even fewer than 12.

Bill Walton: What are the Progressives? You talk in the book about progressive heroes and heroes of each tribe. Who are the heroes to progressives?

Arnold Kling: So for the Progressive ... Each tribe I think of as having a particular axis of sort of moral certainty. When they can frame something along each axis they're sort of morally certain about it. For Progressives the axis is moral certainty is oppress oppressed. So their villains are people who they think are oppressors and their heroes are people who they think of as standing up for the oppressed.

Bill Walton: And Conservatives heroes?

Arnold Kling: So, Conservatives the axis of moral certainty is civilization versus barbarism. Conservatives see civilization as fragile, that's what they want to conserve. They always think that there's some threat some barbarian outlook and so the villains for them are the people who they see as out to destroy this fragile civilization and the heroes are the people who stand up for civilization.

Bill Walton: So Edmund Burke would be a hero to Conservatives?

Arnold Kling: Or maybe somebody like Winston Churchill would be the ultimate hero standing up to the barbarism of the Nazis.

Bill Walton: Yeah, and Libertarians?

Arnold Kling: So for Libertarians the axis of certainty is liberty versus coercion. They view people who want to impose their values on other people coercively as the villains and the heroes are the people who stand up for liberty.

Bill Walton: And they define government as the ultimate coercive tool?

Arnold Kling: Yeah, other than criminal gangs, government is the only main coercive tool, yes.

Bill Walton: In the book, you give some examples of different kinds of issues that could be explained in three ways by the different tribes. Black Lives Matter

Arnold Kling: Yeah, so let's do something even more recent. So something like the NFL players taking a knee.

Bill Walton: Great, let's do the "take a knee."

Arnold Kling: So Progressive looks at that and says, okay, so Black people are oppressed as a group and so if you're against the players kneeling, then you're the side of the oppressors and you're a villain. That would be your natural instinct.

Bill Walton: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Arnold Kling: For Conservatives, things like the National Anthem is part of civilization. The flag, all these symbols are very important and so if you're for the players, then you're against civilization, you're on the side of barbarians and you're wrong.

Libertarians would probably not take as much of an emotional issue on this, but they would say that both, that the players should have freedom of speech, but also that the owners have the freedom to fire players. So that would be the side of liberty on that one.

Bill Walton: Tax Reform.

Arnold Kling: Tax Reform ... Well, as I've seen it in the press and I've gotta tell you, obviously I've kept my eyes closed during this whole tax reform debate.

Bill Walton: That's probably very wise, eyes and ears.

Arnold Kling: But, the Progressives, I think, are beating the oppressor or oppressed axis, as far as I can tell, saying that this is just gonna put money in the hands of the rich people and so on.

The Conservative take was we're now gonna reward effort and risk taking more than we did and so that's good for civilization.

Bill Walton: Well, and they've got the family credit.

Arnold Kling: Yeah.

Bill Walton: The Conservatives want to promote family and traditional values and the tax code is one of the tools for them to do that.

Arnold Kling: Right, exactly. Libertarian would just probably say less taxes, that's all we care about.

Bill Walton: This one would start with no corporate tax at all.

Arnold Kling: Yeah.

Bill Walton: Then go from there. Different conversation for a different day, but the thing that's animating me and I want to understand more about this, people have taken moral positions. Progressives believe they occupy the moral high ground, so do Conservatives, so do Libertarians and when you opened the book with a

quote by my friend John Malden that says, "When you can classify a significant movement as unworthy of your consideration due to your intellectual or political station, it is hard then to sit down and work out solutions to shared problems."

Arnold Kling: Yeah. So there's a saying that, "Never try to win an argument with your spouse," and it sounds like it's the start of a standup comedy thing, like somebody is gonna tell you about some time he tried to win an argument and lost with his spouse or something.

Bill Walton: Yeah.

Arnold Kling: But it's actually a very profound statement. It says that a disagreement with your spouse is not something you should think of as a zero sum, win or lose situation. You can think of it as an opportunity to gain understanding and come to terms with somebody.

Bill Walton: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Arnold Kling: Politics really ought to be that way. This may be very idealistic, but that people should be trying to understand the assumptions that other people have, the background that they have, the perspective that they have and try to come to terms with somebody. That doesn't mean giving up and saying ... you know, not trying to argue your point, but maybe try to both sides learn from each other, rather than trying to beat each other down. Again, it sounds idealistic, but I think 50, 60 years ago, we might have had things like that. There were bipartisan bills, important legislations bipartisan.

Bill Walton: I want to go a couple different directions with this. One of them I want to talk about is the social dimension of politics and about how we are slow to come, because we're part of one of these tribes, it's difficult for us to break free of the tribe because of the punishments that occur when you step outside your social circle.

Arnold Kling: Yeah. There was an article, I think it was in "New York" magazine, I forget, but it was by Andrew Sullivan and I was really jealous that he picked up on a lot of the themes that I picked up on, but I was even more jealous of the illustration that they put on the article. They put three pens of sheep of different colors and it seemed like the goal of each sheep was try to get in the middle of its own set of sheep-

Bill Walton: Great invention.

Arnold Kling: And so as they do that, they crowd together and they separate from the other pens and that gets to what you're talking about, this sort of the social nature of things. People are trying so hard to raise their status within their tribe and to maintain their status within their tribe that the consequence of that is they lose the ability to communicate outside their tribe.

Bill Walton: So what would be the language of Progressives versus the language of Conservative versus the ... are there certain words that are ... [inaudible 00:13:08] signaling words for each tribe?

Arnold Kling: Again, for Progressive, anything to do with oppressor versus oppressed.

Bill Walton: Fairness, equality?

Arnold Kling: Yeah, and somehow intrinsically oppressed classes. You're not looking at somebody and saying, "This is an individual and they've got their own inherited characteristics and their own temperament and their own abilities and skills," you just say, "This person is White, male, straight, therefore they're a member of an oppressed class," or "This person is Black female, ... sorry the White male straight-

Bill Walton: White male straight-

Arnold Kling: Is oppressor.

Bill Walton: I like that.

Arnold Kling: Sorry, oppressor class. The member of the oppressor-

Bill Walton: It's the first time I-

Arnold Kling: Yeah, right.

Bill Walton: And I'm an ex-CEO. That's also part of the oppressed class.

Arnold Kling: Yeah, the oppressor classes and then the oppressed class would be someone like a Black female or a gay male or something and-

Bill Walton: But once you adopt that position and I don't want to get off into making arguments because we're trying to find a common ground, better ways to engage, but once you adopt a position that you're a victim, it seems to me there's no way you can undo that. I mean, I don't know, how far do you take something where you're no longer a victim.

Arnold Kling: I think it's an odd thing that victimhood becomes a privilege.

Bill Walton: That's right.

Arnold Kling: Somebody will stand up in a public situation and say, "As a black woman," and you're supposed to say, "Wow, I'm a White male and I can't argue with that. I don't care what she says. She could say, 'The moon is made of green cheese,' and I can't argue with that because she is standing up in that position." Yeah.

Bill Walton: Anyways it's a conundrum.

Arnold Kling: Yeah.

Bill Walton: It's part of the issue we're trying to face in how to get people to talk with each other and I wanted to talk about something else, but let me stick with the virtue signaling the Conservatives have and Libertarians has, a couple, just to help make it more vivid.

Arnold Kling: The Conservative it's just we're on the side of civilization. We're fighting barbarism. So when Donald Trump gave a speech, I think it was about last August, it was one of his foreign policy speeches, he talked about Western values are under attack and we've got to defend them. Conservatives heard that as dog whistle, "Oh yeah, this guy gets it."

Bill Walton: Yeah.

Arnold Kling: That was actually the first time for a lot of traditional Conservatives to say, "Trump is sounding like a Conservative," and Progressives meanwhile took it as a dog whistle that it was racist, that he was just ... that Western values was a code word for racism. So that's an example of people taking these signals out of [crosstalk 00:16:20].

Bill Walton: And a Libertarian code word signal?

Arnold Kling: The Libertarians would be ... they're the most sort of open borders oriented.

Bill Walton: Yeah.

Arnold Kling: So they would take-

Bill Walton: So they're not building a wall.

Arnold Kling: They're not building a wall and they don't want to gear up for a fight for Western values. They're very pacifist, they think that government trying to impose other values abroad is as dysfunctional as government trying to impose things to [crosstalk 00:17:02]

Bill Walton: So they think bringing Democracy to Iraq was maybe a bad idea.

Arnold Kling: They would have never gone for that, never have gone for that.

Bill Walton: I supported the war, but in hindsight, boy our ambitions way exceeded our ability to deliver. You brought up Trump. Where does he fit into this scheme of three tribes?

Arnold Kling: I think he mixed things up a bit, maybe a lot. I think of him as promoting a divide that I call the Bobo versus anti-Bobo and that's from something that David Brooks wrote 20 years ago.

Bill Walton: David Brooks, yeah.

Arnold Kling: "Bobos in Paradise." Bobo is short for bourgeois bohemian and he was describing-

Bill Walton: Bourgeois bohemian?

Arnold Kling: Yeah.

Bill Walton: Okay.

Arnold Kling: Yeah, and he's fascinating with the contradiction between sort of the people who came out of '60s and '70s, still having the hippie ethos, but then making a lot of money because they were highly educated and highly skilled. So they became a sort of elite and a privileged group ... or maybe not a privileged but certainly successful and then at the same time you have people in flyover country clearly resenting this, and this has really been true for a couple hundred years.

I've just been rereading a book called "Albion's Seed," which is a book about the very origins of American culture when the British came and one group that came over was the Scots-Irish borders, who came and started in Appalachia and they've always hated anyone who thought that they were superior to them, whether they thought they were superior them culturally, economically, politically and Trump picked up on that and they have a lot of descendants culturally and in terms of population and so Trump rallied what some people call Great Appalachia and they're sort of naturally enemies of the bourgeois bohemians.



Bill Walton: Well, there are two other books on that. "Country Class Versus the Rule Class," which [Anglo 00:19:37] and AI [Butcher's 00:19:38] last name Codevilla.

Arnold Kling: Yeah.

Bill Walton: About four or five years ago predicted this and basically lumped both the Republicans and the Democrats together in Congress or in power as part of ruling elite.

Arnold Kling: Yeah.

Bill Walton: Then, the other one was "Born Fighting," from our Senator Jim Webb.

Arnold Kling: James Webb, yeah.

Bill Walton: Yeah, which talked about the Scots-Irish and a lot of my family is Scots-Irish and this idea of being against revenueurs is very appealing.

Arnold Kling: Yeah.

Bill Walton: So Trump captured that.

Arnold Kling: Yes.

Bill Walton: So that explains-

Arnold Kling: And that elite has always hated Trump. In fact, if you go back to Brooks' book, there's actually a paragraph in there where he lists a bunch of cultural symbols that the bourgeois bohemians hate, and even back then, Donald Trump is in that list.

Bill Walton: Trump Tower was number one on the list. How could they tear down that beautiful brownstone?

Arnold Kling: Yeah.

Bill Walton: I can't remember what department store he tore down to put it up. One of the tools you talk about to get at better ways to engage is something called slow thinking as opposed to fast thinking and fast thinking is where we just immediately say, "This is right, this is wrong," coming from our own paradigm.

Arnold Kling: Yes, and one of the things that I've been focusing on since writing the book is sort of the role that social media plays in that I think it increases polarization because you see something on social media and you know things move quickly and just feel like you have to react right away and the faster you react, the more

emotional you react, the more you react in terms of seeing threats and feeling outrage.

So social media, I think, is really accelerated the polarization because you don't take the time to think, you just immediately try to react. I have a blog and I make it a rule to schedule my posts-

Bill Walton: How do we find your blog?

Arnold Kling: Just look for Arnold Kling blog.

Bill Walton: Okay.

Arnold Kling: K-L-I-N-G. You'll get there one of these days. I make a point of scheduling posts two or three days in advance and that's to force me to not react with outrage to things I see and also to anticipate something that's at least gonna last past a two or three-day news cycle. The news cycle is ridiculously fast now. So if you see a big story now, the one thing that you can count on is within a week it'll disappear and that's a big problem. Again, it inhibits slow thinking and slower thinking ... I'm borrowing that from Daniel Kahneman's term, that when people-

Bill Walton: Daniel Kahneman wrote a book on-

Arnold Kling: "Thinking, Fast and Slow."

Bill Walton: Yep.

Arnold Kling: The point is fast thinking is often error prone and emotional and slower thinking is more careful and thoughtful.

Bill Walton: It seems to me like we ... I think it's the gun laws where you're supposed to wait two days before you can get your gun. Maybe we need to do something Libertarians wouldn't like but enact a rule on the internet that you get a two-day rule, where you can't post until you wait two days

Arnold Kling: Yeah, as a Libertarian I don't want to impose rules.

Bill Walton: Yeah.

Arnold Kling: But I do think that sort of hygiene on social media and hygiene in use of the internet are something that our society has not adjusted to and needs to develop. I think we're messing up a lot of people

One example, not relevant so much to this conversation is teenage girls because when you put something online there's so much ... it's a competitive game. How many people like it? How many people approved it? Who's putting me down?

And you do that to teenage girls who are very sensitive about that anyway and people have found that the rate of depression and other neurosis has shot up because of the smartphones and the social media.

Bill Walton: So we're more and more prone to fast thinking because of social media, the internet, 24/7, cable.

Arnold Kling: Think of how cable has to operate. When I'm growing up, if Walter Cronkite goes on to give the news, he doesn't have to worry about somebody flipping the channel, using the remote, whatever. Now, everybody is worried about how to hold people's attention and the best way to hold someone's attention is with breaking news and something that outrages people because when people are outraged, they'll pay attention, and so that's what we get is a maximization of outrage in the media.

Bill Walton: We're also getting the silos. You mentioned something in the book about a study, some issue came up and 18% of people on social media unfriended someone because they disagreed with whatever their ex-friend had said.

Arnold Kling: Yeah, people feel a tremendous threat from others point of view now, and they react to that threat. Sometimes they unfriend people or they find something that supports their side very strongly and really puts down the other side and they share it widely.

I have friends of various politics persuasions on Facebook 'cause I've got various nonintersecting groups of friends-

Bill Walton: Yeah.

Arnold Kling: And the severity of what they post and how antagonistic it is toward the other side is just painful to watch. I basically, in some sense, unfriended everybody 'cause I just don't want to go on Facebook 'cause I don't want to see it.

Bill Walton: I think you and I are similar in that regard. I like to interact with people of all persuasions. I write on my website that some of my best friends are misguided Progressives, but I think that gives us a better ... modestly, I think it helps us in day-to-day life to not be driven made by this political rhetoric.

You write something interesting for me, meaning you, "A politically segregated America where everybody was divided up by Conservative, Libertarian, and Progressive would be dystopian even if it were feasible. I like most of the people with whom I disagree. If anything, I have more close friends among people that differ from me politically than among those who share my political outlook."

Arnold Kling: Yeah, absolutely true. A few days ago we went to see the movie, "The Post," which is, of course, of rally-

Bill Walton: "Washington Post." Kate Graham and ... yeah.

Arnold Kling: Yeah, it's sort of a rallying cry for Progressives. I enjoyed the movie. I liked the people there. I was very happy there and as you know my happy is folk dancing and boy, you don't find a whole lot of Conservatives at a folk dance thing, that's a very Progressive kind of thing and I enjoy those people.

We live in an area where I think something like 95% of the people voted for Clinton in the last election and there are a lot of my friends there. They happen to be wrong politically, but I don't [crosstalk 00:27:35] that's one thing, it's not ... I don't make [crosstalk 00:27:41]

Bill Walton: Well, I'm of the view that the politics can't solve 95% of the problems people face and we've spent a disproportionate of time trying to get the politic solution when there are really other solutions that would matter a lot more, like taking up folk dancing.

Arnold Kling: Yeah.

Bill Walton: And I highly recommend that everyone read Arnold's blog, where he gets to his bio and he's got three or four pages on folk dancing and his career and it makes for terrific reading.

Arnold Kling: Okay.

Bill Walton: What you're current mode? You trade Israeli folk dancing.

Arnold Kling: Yeah, that's what I do.

Bill Walton: You're doing Israeli?

Arnold Kling: Yeah, a ridiculous amount, 10 hours a week.

Bill Walton: That's great. Who does that, how many people?

Arnold Kling: Not very many and it's gonna die. One of my lines is that hobbies are getting narrower, deeper, and older. That is a smaller set of people involved, they're more deeply involved, and then if it's been around a long time, it's older people. There's just opportunities for people to get deeper into something because you can connect up with other people who are deeper into it.

I used to play bridge and social bridge used to be something.

Bill Walton: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Arnold Kling: Now, it's mostly tournament bridge because social bridge was the lowest common denominator activity and no one does that anymore. People do things that they're very, very interested in, they get very deeply into it, and no one else can break in because it comes more competitive. It's a weird observation.

Bill Walton: We're wandering off into big ideas, but I like big ideas and one of the things that strikes me is we're talking about balkanization of many things, it's not just three political tribes, but we've got Israeli folk dancing tribes and contract bridge competitive tribes.

Arnold Kling: It will be nice if the other tribes kind of mix together and the political tribes kind of faded more. I think one of the things that kept politics from being as polarized as it was, was that people were mixing in different contexts.

For example, when I was young, a blue collar worker could afford a box seat at the ballpark in St. Louis.

Bill Walton: Yep.

Arnold Kling: Now, the top seats go for \$600, \$800 and blue collar worker maybe can get something in the outfield, maybe. So we really have separated a lot more along class lines and political lines and being able to mix and sort of have a bunch of baseball fans of different social classes at the same ballpark was something that we're kind of losing.

Bill Walton: This is one of the themes of Charles Murray's "Coming Apart."

Arnold Kling: Yeah.

Bill Walton: Terrific book on the same topic, about a related topic. One of things you write about in the book and we've got to wrap up in just a minute, although for me, this could go on for hours. You talk about motivated reasoning and one of the things you talk about is that you say that, "If people were minded you'd think the more information they had they more they would come to agreement on an issue. Surprisingly, political scientists and psychologists have found the opposite. More polarization exists among well informed voters than among poorly informed voters."

Arnold Kling: Yes, and there's also an experiment where they give people the same information but two groups coming at it from different points of view and each of them says that the information makes their support for their point of view stronger and makes the other point of view weaker. So this is a very important phenomenon that promotes polarization.

I sat on a jury once on a tough case and it was a very different process. People were deliberating, people were listening to each other, people changed their minds and that's very different than when you come into a situation with a strong prior point of view, when you come into a situation really genuinely open-minded, the whole dynamic of the discussion is more constructive. I wish we could reconstruct that in politics.

Bill Walton: We wife, Sarah encountered that on a jury trial. She was on a murder trial and somebody came in with the view of the oppressor model, which is that anybody accused of a crime had to innocent because the police were always bad and always gonna be arresting the wrong people. So this person came in saying, "No matter what is presented to me, I'm not gonna change my mind."

Arnold Kling: Really? And did they stick with that?

Bill Walton: No.

Arnold Kling: No, okay.

Bill Walton: No ... who talked about peer pressure. The other 11 finally said, "You know, look, if you came with that, you shouldn't have even agreed to join the jury." The trial had a good outcome but that's an example of, I think, that motivated reasoning.

Arnold Kling: Yeah, but there is something about the setting. The way the judge instructs you and the whole drama of the courtroom that makes jurors very conscientious and very open-minded and we've lost that in politics if we've ever had it, but if we could somehow recover something like that, it be a good-

Bill Walton: Well, you pointed to one of the reasons and it's provocative but I think there's a lot of truth it. You point out in the book that as people become less religious and that becomes the basis for their faith and their passion and their moral views, politics has taken on an even bigger role, and so a lot of that moral morality that would be part of the major religions is now vested in politics.

Arnold Kling: Yeah, other people have made that observation too. Yeah, that's a source of concern, sure.

Bill Walton: What other people? I thought you first?

Arnold Kling: No. No, I think it goes way back actually.

Bill Walton: What do you think about that?

Arnold Kling: I think it's plausible. I don't know that there's much to be done about it. I wish there was some way that people could engage on things, on moral issues without immediately turning them into political issues.

Bill Walton: Well, let's come back to a solution and we will end on a positive note because I think your book points towards one of the solutions and it's slow thinking and it's for all of us begin recognize the moral assumptions that each of the other members of the tribe brings and to respect that.

Arnold Kling: Yes, I think the one thing is to try to resist when you hear something that appeals to your tribe, instead of saying, "Oh, I want to share that, that's really powerful," take a skeptical point of view and try to take the most charitable view of someone on the other side. So don't assume the reason that a Conservative disagrees with you is that the Conservative is an oppressor and don't assume that the reason the Progressive disagrees with you is that the Progressive is a nihilist whose trying to tear down civilization and don't think that the reason a Libertarian disagrees with you is that the Libertarian is either a nihilist or an oppressor. Try to make a charitable interpretation of why someone else would disagree with you. That would be one start.

Bill Walton: I think that's great wisdom. We've been talking with Arnold Kling, whose written a great book, "The Three Languages of Politics." It can be found on Amazon. You can reach Arnold at his blog, the Arnold Kling blog?

Arnold Kling: Yeah, you'll find it.

Bill Walton: You'll find it and he basically almost invented the notion of blogging and he's got a tremendous body of work on it. I highly recommend everybody go on and read and learn from Arnold.

Arnold?

Arnold Kling: Okay, enjoyed the conversation. Thanks, Bill.

Bill Walton: Great, thank you.