Emperor plays defense on Japan’s constitution

On Monday, Japan’s Emperor Akihito signaled again he would like to step down from the world’s oldest hereditary monarchy. Yet, his veiled speech contained a larger message for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe: that he should proceed carefully before revising Japan’s postwar constitution.

In keeping with his apolitical role, the 82-year-old Akihito did not say straight out he wanted to abdicate. Existing laws have no provision for a living emperor to give up his throne. Instead, he spoke about “a decline in my fitness level because of my advancing age.”
WASHINGTON — Every couple of years or so, I feel the need to whine about the plight of newspapers. It’s August. I’m Trumpeled out. So, today’s the day.

Except that HBO’s John Oliver beat me to it with the best defense of newspapers — ever. His recent “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver” monologue about the suffering newspaper industry went viral in journalism circles but he deserves a broader audience.

Besides, it’s funny.

Leavening his important message with enough levity to keep the dopamine flowing, Oliver points out most news outlets, faux, Fox and otherwise, essentially rely on newspapers for their material. This includes, he says, pulping with self-awareness, Oliver himself. He’s sort of part of the problem, in other words, but at least he knows it, which makes it OK, sort of.

The problem: People want news but they don’t want to pay for it.

Consequently, newspapers are failing while consumers get their information from comedy shows, talk shows and websites that essentially lift material for their own purposes.

But somewhere, somebody is actually sitting through a boring meeting, poring over data or interviewing someone who isn’t nearly as important as he thinks he is in order to produce a story that will become news. As Oliver points out, news is a food chain, yet with rare exceptions, the most important members of the chain are at the bottom, turning off the lights in newsrooms where gladiators, scholars and characters once roamed. Some still do, though most are becoming rather long-ished in the tooth. (You can actually get that fixed, you know.)

That any newspapers are surviving, if not for much longer in any recognizable form, can be attributed at least in some part to the dedication of people who really believe in the mission of a free press and are willing to work harder for less — tweeting, blogging, filming and whatnot in addition to trying to write worthy copy. Most of the poor slobs who fell in love with the printed word go unnoticed by any but their peers. An exception is Marty Baron, the unassuming executive editor of The Washington Post, recently featured in the film, “Spotlight” about the Boston Globe’s stories under Baron’s leadership about sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

It’s a good movie, not just because of great casting and acting but because it’s a great tale about a massive investigative effort that led to church reform and the beginning of healing for victims. (Not to worry, my pay comes as a percentage of the money I make for the company. This won’t make a dime of difference.)

My point — shared by Oliver — is that only newspapers are the brick-and-mortar of the Fourth Estate’s edifice. Only they have the wherewithal to do the kind of reporting that leads to stories such as “Spotlight.” What happens to the “news” when there are no newspapers left?

We seem doomed to find out as people increasingly give up their newspaper subscriptions and seek information from free-content sources. And though newspapers have an online presence, it’s hard to get readers to pay for content.

As Oliver says, now is a very good time to be a corrupt politician. Between buyouts, layoffs and newspaper hole reductions, there’s hardly anyone paying attention. Except, perhaps, to kitties!

In a hilarious spoof of “Spotlight” called “Stoplight,” Oliver shows a short film of a news meeting where the old-school reporter is pitching a story about city hall corruption. The rest of the staff, cheerful human toparties to the reporter’s kudzu-draped mangrove — are more interested in a cat that looks like a raccoon.

And then there’s Sam Zell, erstwhile owner of the Tribune Company, who summed up the sad trajectory of the nation’s interests and, perhaps, our future while speaking to Orlando Sentinel staffers in 2008. When he said he wanted to increase revenues by giving readers what they want, a female voice objected, “What readers want are puppy dogs!”

Zell exploded, calling her comment the sort of “journalistic arrogance of deciding that puppies don’t count. . . . Hopefully, we get to the point where our revenue is so significant that we can do puppies and Iraq, OK? (Expletive) you.”

Yes, he said that.

Moral of the story: If you don’t subscribe to a newspaper, you don’t get to complain about the sorry state of journalism — and puppies you shall have.

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The fall — and rise? — of moderate Republicans

Libertarianism has long been treated as a fringe ideology obsessed with the gold standard, legalization of hard drugs and "Atlas Shrugged." Ron Paul, who ran for president in the 2012 GOP primaries, was the archetype, calling for an end to Social Security and the Federal Reserve. But when Libertarian Party presidential nominee Gary Johnson extols fiscal responsibility and social tolerance, he brings to mind a different political tradition: that of moderate Republicans.

There was a time, not so long ago, when they dominated the GOP. Presidents Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush sprang from this wing of the party. So, arguably, did George W. Bush, along with nominees such as Bob Dole, John McCain and Mitt Romney.

But the party has moved steadily to the right recently. Rank-and-file GOP voters grew significantly more conservative in the first decade of this century. It's a measure of how conservative House Republicans have become that Speaker Paul Ryan, once a tea party hero, is now viewed with distrust by many in his caucus.

That growing tilt leaves an electoral opening for a candidate who thinks the government shouldn't meddle too much in either markets or morals. Hillary Clinton isn't interested in occupying it. So Johnson, who is averaging 9 percent support in the RealClearPolitics average of four-way polls that include him and Green Party nominee Jill Stein, has that niche to himself.

In Kansas, long solidly Republican, moderates are rebounding, thanks to the unpopularity of conservative Gov. Sam Brownback. In the Aug. 2 legislative primary, moderates defeated incumbent Brownback allies in more than a dozen races.

Since 2012, the share of Republicans who say they are economically and socially conservative has shrunk from 57 percent to 42 percent. But the national party's message hasn't caught up with that trend.

If Trump loses — and particularly if he loses big — moderates might find themselves taken more seriously in Congress and the party. Many Republicans probably already are wondering how much brighter their electoral prospects would be with, say, John Kasich of Ohio atop the ballot in November.

Victories by senators who clashed with Trump would give them more influence on the GOP's direction. A strong showing by Libertarian Johnson would encourage Republicans to adopt at least some of his ideas. And voter frustration with gridlock might aid lawmakers who don't treat compromise as a crime.

Pragmatic, centrist Republicans largely have vanished from the American political scene. But their absence leaves a vacuum that begs to be filled.

— Chicago Tribune

By Garry Trudeau