



The Monty Burns Republicans

By Rob Dreher – July 12th, 2013

Cut food stamps but go all in for corporate welfare for Big Ag? That's the Republican Party and the farm bill. Reports *The Washington Post*:

House Republicans narrowly passed a farm bill on Thursday that was stripped of hundreds of billions in funding for food stamps, abandoning four decades of precedent to gain the backing of conservative lawmakers.

The 216 to 208 vote was a victory for a Republican caucus that has struggled to pass the most basic of legislation, but it also set up weeks of acrimony and uncertainty as House and Senate leaders must reconcile two vastly different visions for providing subsidies to farmers and feeding the hungry.

Ross Douthat is not amused:

This is egregious whatever you think of the food stamp program, and it's indicative of why the endless, often-esoteric debates about the Republican future actually matter to our politics. Practically any conception of the common good, libertarian or communitarian or anywhere in between, would produce better policy than a factionally-driven approach of further subsidizing the rich while cutting programs for the poor. The compassionate-conservative G.O.P. of George W. Bush combined various forms of corporate welfare with expanded spending on social programs, which was obviously deeply problematic in various ways ... but not as absurd and self-dealing as only doing welfare for the rich.

More:

Reasonable people can disagree, in other words, about what kind of conservatism would best serve the common good. But everyone should agree that any alternative would be preferable to a Republican Party that doesn't seem to think about the common good at all.

Amen. Every House Democrat opposed this bill because it jettisoned food stamps. Only 12 Republican House members voted against the bill. Only twelve. Andrew Sullivan:

There's no small government consistency here – just an embrace of subsidizing Big Ag and a contempt for the needy in a long, protracted growth recession. Are they trying to make themselves look like total douchebags?

The Monty Burns Republicans. That's what they are. Look, I will grant you that the food stamp program almost certainly needs reform, given the astronomical rate of growth in the past

decade, past even what you would expect in the face of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. On the other hand, we have a lot more poor people, and people barely making it. *The Wall Street Journal* has a good, balanced piece on the complexities of the food-stamp program and its growth. It has become much easier to qualify for food stamps, but that is on purpose. Excerpt:

“We decided to adopt [easier] standards in order to prevent [people] from having to spend all of their life savings,” said Richard Berry, a GOP-appointed director of the agency that screens applicants in Mississippi, where one out of every three children receive benefits. “We didn’t want people to have to become destitute in order to get help.”

There are no doubt some lazy people who are enjoying being on the dole, and who have no intention of getting off of food stamps. But I bet most people who came onto the rolls in the past few years are like this guy from the *Journal* story:

With more entering the program, social service groups began recommending it as an option for struggling families that previously hadn’t applied.

That is what happened to Basem Eljauni, a 55-year-old cashier at a Sam’s Club in Greensboro, N.C., who lost his two businesses—a grocery store and a gas station—and his \$250,000 in savings and investments. The father of six says he now makes around \$1,000 a month if he is lucky and supplements his income with about \$800 in government-paid food assistance and handouts from charities.

“It’s hard to see yourself stuck on food stamps,” said Mr. Eljauni. “Amazing—I never thought I was going to be stuck in the system.”

I’ve never had to rely on food stamps, but I have friends who have found themselves in a very tight economic spot, through no fault of their own, and who had to go on food stamps to feed their children. There is no shame in that. It can happen to people you know, to people in your own family. It can happen to you.

Food writer Corby Kummer, who, like most people who follow food policy, hates the farm bill, puts this latest GOP move into perspective. It’s not at all a crazy idea to separate agricultural policy from anti-hunger policy, he says:

Anyone who looks at the farm bill for a few minutes—or, like Dan Imhoff, devotes a book to it, or, like Marion Nestle, an entire semester’s course to it—sees what a chimera or, more to the point, a monster it is. It has next to nothing to do with the farms most people think of—the ones growing mixed crops, the ones that supply farmer’s markets. It doesn’t mention environmental protection or land conservation, though some of the country’s most important safeguards are in it. And it doesn’t mention nutrition assistance or hunger, though fully four-fifths of it are food stamps. Why not keep the agricultural parts, even if they benefit only industrial agriculture, in what’s called the farm bill, and call the food-assistance portion what it is? That would get the farm bill back on the rails, and stop letting SNAP debates hijack every vote.

Here’s why not: because that means, as anyone in the anti-hunger community recognizes, pushing the 47 million Americans on food stamps onto an ice floe.

More Kummer:

In case it might have crossed your mind that the Republicans—who left subsidies to millionaire farmers untouched and un-subject to means testing, as the Cato Institute pointed out right away—might give a bit more consideration to agriculture lobbyists than to food-stamp recipients, Derek Thompson makes the role of campaign contributions absolutely plain in this good and stark piece.

The Republican Party is throwing corporate welfare at farmers, but telling people who are so poor they qualify for government aid to feed themselves that they are not a priority. As a matter of basic politics, the Republicans have lost their minds. This is Mitt Romney's 47 percent remark all over again.

President Obama has vowed to veto this GOP farm bill if it hits his desk, so Congress is going to have to try again. You know who needs to find their voice and use it right now? Conservative Christian pastors and leaders. Christians need to seriously reconsider uncritical support for a political party that prioritizes lavishing subsidies on the agribusiness rich while telling the poor to sit quietly and wait for scraps.