

NATIONAL REVIEW

The Real Reactionaries

Most modern liberals have never met a government program they'd be willing to change.

By Michael Tanner
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Reactionary adj. (of a person or a set of views) opposing political or social liberalization or reform.

The term is almost always applied to conservatives. Certainly there is a strain of conservatism that feels an undue nostalgia for a less tolerant, less diverse, 1950s-style America. But more and more often these days, “reactionary” would better apply to those ostensible liberals who oppose virtually any change to any government program that has ever existed.

We have, for example, long been accustomed to liberal politicians opposing proposals to reform entitlement programs, but what are we to make of it when someone like Elizabeth Warren, self-appointed scourge of corporations and the 1 percent, starts to champion corporate-welfare programs like the Export-Import Bank? The mere existence of a government program seems to render it immune to criticism.

Evidence seems to make little difference. Just last month, the trustees of Social Security and Medicare released their latest report, warning that both programs were heading rapidly toward insolvency. Social Security is running roughly \$27.7 trillion in the red, an increase of \$1.8 trillion over last year's number. Medicare's total unfunded liabilities exceed \$48.1 trillion, an increase of \$5.2 trillion since last year's report.

How did the Left react? Representative Sander Levin (Mich.), ranking Democrat on the House Ways and Means Committee, spoke for most Democrats in claiming that “the Social Security Trustees report underscores that the program remains strong, with its long-term future presenting a manageable challenge.” Representative Xavier Beccera (Calif.), the top Democrat on the Social Security subcommittee, actually said, “The most serious near-term risk Social Security faces is the impact of four years of Republican budget cuts, which have resulted in local office closings and staff shortages, long wait times on the phone and in person, and growing backlogs of Americans waiting for their earned benefits.” Senator Bill Nelson (Fla.), who chairs the Senate Special Committee on Aging, claimed that “today, Medicare is more solvent than it was in 1965.”

Social Security was conceptualized in Bismarck's 19th-century Prussia and introduced here in 1935. Medicare is half a century old. The world has changed a great deal since either of those programs was born, but modernizing them to reflect today's technological and economic conditions is off the table.

Pick your issue, and liberals have become the defenders of the status quo. Education? Millions of low-income and minority students remain trapped in failing schools, but the liberal establishment, dependent on the teachers' unions, opposes charter schools, school vouchers, and education tax credits. Obamacare? Every word has become gospel — except those unilaterally changed by the president himself.

Perhaps nothing reveals how reactionary the Left has become as much as its response to Paul Ryan's recent proposal for welfare reform.

Paul Krugman may believe that our current plethora of overlapping and contradictory welfare programs is "fairly efficient," but few others do. The sad fact is that federal and state governments have spent a combined \$18 trillion fighting poverty during the 50 years since Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty. Last year alone, we spent close to \$1 trillion on at least 126 separate anti-poverty programs. Yet, by conventional measures, that spending has accomplished virtually nothing in terms of reducing poverty. Even recent studies, based on alternative measures that do show some initial success during the early years of the War on Poverty, indicate that progress has essentially stalled out in recent decades. To most people, this would suggest the need to change our strategy.

Ryan's proposal was hardly radical. He didn't propose abolishing the welfare state. He didn't even propose significant cuts in federal welfare spending. Instead he simply suggested consolidating eleven current programs, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, and housing assistance, into a single block grant to the states. States would have the option of participating in the block grant or continuing to operate under the current programs. States that chose the block grant would receive the same amount of funding they do now, but would have more latitude to experiment in order to find options that worked better than what we have today. In order to ensure accountability and to prevent a "race to the bottom," participating states would have to provide a detailed plan showing how they intended to use the money, with specific benchmarks for success. That's not exactly a proposal out of Dickensian London.

But the Left didn't even want to discuss it except to denounce it. Representative Rose DeLauro (Conn.) found it "almost diabolical." Chris Van Hollen (Md.), the number-three Democrat in the House, warned that "people in poverty will have a much more difficult time accessing support to help them climb out of poverty." Krugman warned that any proposal from Ryan could not be trusted, while Laura Clawson at *Daily Kos* called it "just what you'd expect of Paul Ryan: the ultimate heartless Republican attempt to slash the safety net into ribbons, cloaked in the guise of concerned condescension."

It is perfectly reasonable to disagree with Ryan's proposal. But what would they do instead? Essentially . . . crickets. No answer. No counterproposal. No ideas. Our welfare system is just fine. It may need a bit more money, but just like every other government program it doesn't need any serious changes.

It does make you wonder who the real reactionaries are.

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