



Conservatives Embrace Criminal Justice Reform

By Jennifer G. Hickey

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More than two decades after Massachusetts' controversial prisoner furlough program was used to define Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis as "weak on crime," conservatives and Republican presidential candidates are increasingly backing efforts to reform the criminal justice system.

"There's been such a sea-change. In probably the last three to four years, conservatives have woken up to the fact that [mandatory minimums] is an enormous problem in their communities," Molly Gill, a government affairs counsel for Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM), told Al-Jazeera America during an interview at February's Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC).

"People have to give conservatives credit on this issue. They speak and think about it in exactly the right way. This is big government in the courtroom; this is Washington, D.C., telling a judge in Washington State how to sentence," added Gill.

Rather than debating who is "tougher on crime," Republicans and Democrats are more often engaging in discussion of how to reform the criminal justice system, which is what occurred Tuesday night on the Senate floor.

Republican Sens. Mike Lee of Utah and Jeff Flake of Arizona joined with Democratic Sens. Cory Booker of New Jersey and Dick Durbin of Illinois to push possible changes to sentencing guidelines under the Smarter Sentencing Act, just one of the bills that has been introduced in the last year.

"After a generation of tough-on-crime policies helped make communities around the country safer, many of our federal criminal justice laws are now out of date, counterproductive, and unfair," said Lee at a February criminal justice conference at the White House.

While Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul is perhaps the most visible proponent of criminal justice reform, he is not the only potential presidential candidate to express support for the issue.

"Most of the Republican presidential candidates are touting their positions in favor of reducing prison time, allowing some felons to expunge or seal their criminal records, and even reforming federal drug laws. Rather than putting more people in jail and throwing away the key, Republicans are for letting people out of jail," writes Michael Tanner, an analyst with the libertarian Cato Institute, in the National Review.

Tanner notes that Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker is one of the exceptions, and has backed increasing mandatory minimum sentences.

Just this month, former Texas Gov. Rick Perry went on the record with his support by endorsing the "statement of principles" outlined by the pro-reform group Right on Crime.

"During my leadership as governor, Texas shut down three prisons, and we saved taxpayers \$2 billion. When I left office, Texas had the lowest crime rate in our state since 1968. My administration started treatment programs and drug courts for people who wouldn't be served well by sitting behind bars. We made sure our parole and probation programs were strong. Most of all, we evaluated prisons based on whether they got results," Perry said in his statement.

Right on Crime is an initiative launched by the Texas Public Policy Foundation and it has gained the support of another 2016 presidential aspirant, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush.