

Obviously they're not compatible with the type of free society I described in #2068, viz, a laissez faire ecogovernment protecting the "rights" of propertied producers-acquirers and blind to all other humans within the state's territorial limits. But the two sets of "rights" are not diametrical-adversarial; rather, they partly overlap; and even where they confront each other, they have high potential for creative, prohuman resolution (ie, for being good news for everybody, and not just at home but also abroad). That is my belief and my prayer. My observation, however, is that--hindered by aged mutual classistic antagonisms and fears--"rights"/"rights" honest and earnest dialog has hardly begun. How can we, brief lives that we have, move our society toward that dialog? Not, I think, by being a partisan for either set of "rights." I've tried, and given up, both. Now I'm eclectic; to put it crudely, I believe in some rights of rich against poor and some rights of poor against rich--but I don't believe in the "against"! To put it another way, I'm neither capitalist nor socialist (or even "democratic socialist" or "Christian socialist"). Indeed, I've become anti-ideological about "rights"/"rights." So it's understandable that at our UCC/MA annual assembly this month (June/86) I spoke against economic "rights" and then, as I said in my speech I would, voted for them.

Take the right to employment. It would make a shambles of "the law of supply and demand" (which then is, in my view, a bad law made even worse when sanctioned by a so-called "law of nature" corrupted by a pseudoscientific "law of the survival of the fittest"). Our 1914 economist (my #2068) would agree with Mickey Kaus that "Only work works" but would be appalled at the latter's social engineering of the right to work (packaged in the responsibility to work though it is). Let's hear, on this, a rightly generally admired (black) columnist, 28June86:

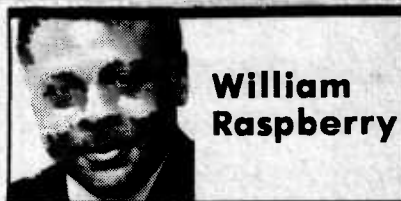
Everybody talks about welfare reform; hardly anybody offers a plan for actually doing welfare reform. The reason is that it is a good deal easier to see the dilemmas of public assistance (for all but the aged and disabled) than to fashion reasonable alternatives.

One obvious dilemma is that to set the welfare grant below what it takes to live decently is to condemn poor people to a less-than-decent existence. But to raise the payment to meet the official poverty guidelines creates a serious disincentive for any otherwise eligible person to take a low-paid job.

Another is that attempts to use the welfare system to enforce prudent behavior -- for instance refraining from having more children than you can afford to care for -- end up punishing innocent children at least as much as their improvident mothers, and punishes irresponsible fathers not at all.

Nor is workfare much of an answer. Too many welfare recipients are unqualified for jobs that pay enough to replace the welfare check and training programs generally turn out to be -- for all but the precious few who really do learn something marketable -- a way to keep people busy at public expense while they continue drawing a welfare check.

Is there a way out of the mess? Mickey Kaus thinks so. He will offer his draconian solution in the July 7 issue of the once-liberal New Republic, of which he is a correspondent.



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His prescription, though he takes a dozen pages to lay it out, comes down to this: Get rid of welfare for all able-bodied adults and guarantee everybody (not just AFDC mothers) a guaranteed public-service job paying slightly less than the minimum wage. He anticipates some of the more obvious questions:

- Would such jobs pay enough to support a family? No. "But there are ways to supplement the incomes of low-wage workers outside the welfare system (the current Earned Income Credit, for instance), while preserving an incentive to seek better pay."

- Would people be allowed to starve? No. Those who refused to take (or who lost) such jobs as cleaning public parks and buildings could always fall back on soup kitchens and homeless shelters and the like, and the government might offer counseling and training. "The one thing the government would not offer them is cash."

- What about mothers with young children? "The government would announce that, after a certain date, single mothers would no longer qualify for cash welfare payments." He would only provide government-subsidized day care for the children.

Thus "the central ambiguity of our welfare system -- whether single mothers should work -- would be resolved cleanly and clearly in favor of work."

- What about mothers with very young children, two years and under? You might allow temporary welfare payments for the first two years of a child's life (but with a three-year limit "to avoid the have-another-kid loophole"). But getting rid of the "free ride" altogether, except for in-kind nutritional assistance during pregnancy and infancy, "would clearly have stronger impact. It would put mothers in the world of work without letting them grow accustomed to dependency." If a mother won't take a job, let the government take the children.

His proposal, he says, is "a long-term cultural offensive, not a budget-control program or an expression of compassion. The sharpness and simplicity of its choices -- no cash welfare for the able-bodied, no exceptions for parenthood -- are its main virtue, because they embody with unmistakable clarity the social norms that are in danger of disappearing in the underclass culture."

Liberals won't like the harshness of the proposal; conservatives won't like its guaranteed-work feature, and labor will resist its wage-lowering threat. But as nasty as it sounds, it might be a reasonable place to at least start thinking about reform. As he put it, "Only work works."

William Raspberry is a Washington Post columnist.