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The Food Stamp Debacle

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 12, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Remember when Senator Robert Dole was considered a conservative? Those days are long gone when one considers the 216-208 vote yesterday in the House of Representatives to pass a Farm Bill that de-linked farm subsidies from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps.

It was Sen. Dole who, in the late 1970s, worked with Democratic Senator George McGovern to combine farm subsidies and food stamps within one omnibus bill. There was an obvious political rationale for the move: The bill would garner support from mostly Republican members of Congress who represented rural states with farming interests and from most Democratic members whose constituents struggled with hunger as one of the many pathologies attending urban poverty.

But, the linkage was not merely political. I think we can all concede that there is no better mechanism for distributing goods and services than the market, but some of us also believe that markets need to be evaluated morally based on their actual ability to further other important social goals. In this case, the market had no way to help farmers cope with the vagaries of their industry, nor did it provide its own mechanism to keep the price of food low enough that poor children would not necessarily also be hungry children. Farm subsidies ? although they have been much abused by large agribusinesses ? nonetheless provide stability to an industry that is as vital to national security as the Department of Defense: The failure to guarantee a steady supply of food to a nation?s citizenry has often been the catalyst for nasty social upheaval, in ancient and modern times. And, the case for SNAP is obvious: While the government, obviously, cannot always prevent economic downturns, a program like food stamps guarantees that even if the economy tanks, and the ranks of the poor grow, kids need not go hungry, or at least not as hungry, as they otherwise would.

Yesterday, the House GOP set aside that linkage and it did so merely for political reasons. The ?cut the budget at any price? mantra of the Tea Party has overshadowed the nation?s political debate on every subject. Even though just about everyone agrees that SNAP works, that it achieves its objective, and that it is a remarkable testimony to that fact that during the recent prolonged recession, rates of malnutrition did not rise. And, this mantra was also impervious to the news that in June, the federal government actually posted a surplus of $116.5 billion. To be sure, half of that total came from a one-time payment from Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Still, the ?looming threat? of fiscal default seems a lot less threatening these days than it did two or three years ago, in part because when the economy is doing better, tax receipts start rising and unemployment checks become fewer. There were also two policy decisions that are affecting government revenues: The increase in tax rates on the wealthiest Americans at the start of the year and the failure to avoid sequestration in March. No matter how you look at it, the short range fiscal picture is a lot better and the long-term fiscal picture is a bit better.

My friend Melinda Henneberger has a wonderful column on [1]SNAP [1] [1]this morning, making the case for the program?s renewal and saying everything I have to say on the subject, only saying it better.

I wish to call attention to another column, this one by Ross Douthat [2]at the New York Times, which gets to

the real heart of the problem in Washington. Douthat is defending Rich Lowry and Bill Kristol, editors respectively of National Review and the Weekly Standard, whose article urging House Republicans to vote ?no? on comprehensive immigration reform has garnered much attention. Douthat suggests that instead of a comprehensive bill including a pathway to citizenship, Republicans should embrace a mix of border security measures, more high-skilled immigration, and the DREAM Act. His final sentence: ?Which is to say, once again, that I think Lowry and Kristol are right and their liberal critics wrong: For the G.O.P. on immigration, there is an alternative.? The words jump off the page: ?For the G.O.P.? Not, for the 11 million human beings who live in the shadows, mind you, but good for ?the G.O.P.?

Isn?t this the explanation of the Farm Bill vote too? The bill is not good for hungry children or hungry elders. But, it is good politics ?for the G.O.P.? It certainly is not good for the GOP?s constituents. Among the southern states that Gov, Romney swept last year, all of them clock among the highest participation rates for SNAP, with Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee leading the pack, states in which President Obama garnered 41%, 43% and 39% of the vote respectively.

There was a time not too distant in Washington when members of Congress may have possessed very different ideological visions, but that did not prevent them from cooperating to get things done. Those days are gone. I do not envy Speaker Boehner and I do not see many good choices for him as he seeks to lead his caucus. But, it is difficult to feel sorry for him either. For years, the GOP has winked at the Tea Party craziness, even encouraged it at times, and now they must find a way to manage the craziness. When you ride the tiger, as the saying goes, you get off when the tiger decides. There is no distance anymore between campaigning and governing, they are all thrown together into a nasty zero-sum game in which hungry children and exploited immigrants get the shaft, so long as it is good ?for the G.O.P.? There are a few, happy exceptions to the rule: I called attention to Cong. Paul Ryan?s efforts on immigration reform yesterday. But, that is the exception that proves the rule. A group of ideologues has captured the House GOP caucus. They have the power to stymie much that we expect our government to do. Those Democratic voters who stayed home in the 2012 midterms have no one to blame but themselves. But, this is the reality we face and it is difficult to see how it will improve. It is a gloomy day in Washington.

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