



Children's Advocacy Institute

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THE ROAD NOT TAKEN - OUR CHILDREN

by Robert C. Fellmeth

How much do we love ourselves more than our children in need? Over the last 25 years our adult generation has been in power, let us count the ways.

1. We know the median income of an unwed mother with children is 20% below the poverty line, while the income of a married couple with children is above \$40,000. However, unwed birth rates have gone from 8% to 32% during our generation, and it's not the teen pregnancies politicians love to condemn-80% of unwed births are to adult women.

2. Men are leading the "me first" parade, impregnating with abandon, and then averaging \$23 per month per child in support payments for the 4 million California children they have abandoned. This private irresponsibility-largely ignored or excused by political liberals-has been joined by public disinvestment-largely arranged by political conservatives. Together, they have accomplished a contract on America's children: Children do not have a right to be intended by a married couple: Adult sexual rights categorically supersede, and we are not going to support the unintended children of others.

3. We enact a property tax system which assesses new homeowners (young adults and our children growing up) five, six, even ten times the taxes demanded of long-time (older) homeowners to pay for the same governmental services. Together with the land inflation we have encouraged, this makes home ownership problematical for many of our families with children.

4. Our poorest children live in households paying a higher total state and local tax rate on income - largely due to high sales taxes - than the upper 20% of earners (who are disproportionately older).

5. We provide guaranteed medical care to every single senior citizen, but continue to leave 20% of our children totally uncovered and without preventive care, although they have three times the poverty rate of our seniors (us baby boomers in a few years) and cost one-fifth as much to insure.

6. We enact Proposition 98 so that a minimum percentage of our state's general fund goes to public education. We congratulate ourselves, and then our public officials make the minimum into a maximum, leaving California in the bottom third of the nation in school spending per child.

7. Notwithstanding a general tax increase in 1991, we otherwise enact twelve straight years of tax cuts and deductions for middle class and wealthy adults, while raising taxes on poor children (for example, reducing the renter's tax credit by more than 2/3 and excluding all those near or below the poverty line from any benefit). California's general fund, which supports education and child investment generally, sits on a tax base that looks increasingly like Swiss cheese, but it takes an affirmative 2/3 vote of the legislature to fill any hole.

Executive Director
Robert C. Fellmeth

Council For Children
Thomas A. Papageorge
Council Chair
Martin D. Fern
Birt Harvey, M.D.
Louise Horvitz, M.S.W.,
Psy.D.

Hon. Leon S. Kaplan
Paul A. Peterson
Gary F. Redenbacher
Gary Richwald, M.D.,
M.P.H.
Blair L. Sadler
Gloria Perez Samson
Alan Shumacher, M.D.
Owen Smith

University of San Diego
School of Law
5998 Alcalá Park
San Diego, CA 92110
(619) 260-4806
(619) 260-4753 (Fax)

926 J Street
Suite 709
Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 444-3875
(916) 444-6611 (Fax)

Reply to:
 San Diego
 Sacramento

8. During the last decade we have slashed the basic safety net for children by 35% in spending power, and are now imposing an absolute 60-month lifetime maximum of assistance for children. But when families reach the deadline, we are careful to call it "ending the adult's share."

9. We know that more of our children require some education after high school for jobs in the future economy. But we are not increasing capacity to keep pace, leaving a lower percentage of youth with access to vocational training, community colleges, and university opportunity, just when a much higher percentage will need it.

The near future? It's bleaker still. At the federal level, we have a golden opportunity to show we're made of the real stuff: \$1 trillion anticipated in surplus over the next decade. The Republicans want it all to go to middle class adult and the wealthy. The Clinton alternative would give 88% of it to three accounts: Social Security for seniors, Medicare for seniors, and private pension subsidies for seniors.

We top this off by exempting the first million in inheritance from any taxation whatever. The major new federal program to medically insure kids is only marginally successful, and most of the trumpeted spending and announced coverage will likely not occur. And the remaining sop for kids-100,000 new teachers nationally-is typical of child-related spending: a raw number with impressive sound which is not to a scale which means much of anything.

Is the near future brighter in California? Not at all.

Our new education-Governor spends for K-12 public education all of one-quarter of 1% more than he is obligated to spend, or his opponent would have spent. A major foster care reform measure to save many of our 110,000 abused kids lacking adoptive parents is shelved as costing money. And child advocates have dozens of other examples of a "just say no to children" mentality at the Capitol, centered in the Governor's Department of Finance. The list is long and growing.

As a state, we find \$4.3 billion in unexpected funds in May 1999, and virtually none of it is invested in children because our new governor claims it will "add to the base."

Earth to Sacramento: These children are our base. Our new governor is bound and determined not to be caricatured as was his mentor Jerry Brown. No "tax and spend" simplifications. No zen idiosyncrasies. No late night talk show monologue ridicule. Few new waves which leave a wake of enemies. Image cultivation as a man with a heart, but also moderate, careful, and independent.

The reality? One hand is raised, with finger moistened in the air, polling continuously; the other hand is rummaging frenetically through campaign contributor pockets. The Governor seeks the "middle of the road" in all things. Problem: Where is the road going? It is headed toward a permanent underclass of abject, hopeless poverty-not unlike the Third World countries we have so long pitied.

According to the Columbia University Center on Child Poverty, over 48% of California's children under age 6 live below or near the federal poverty line. Although among the wealthiest states in the union, we are among the five with the highest young child poverty rate, now in unwelcome company with West Virginia and Mississippi. No state has seen a harsher growing division between the wealthy and the poor over the last decade.

The Governor and Legislature are hopelessly lost in vector politics, passively mediating between alternatives framed by a record 1,600 professional registered lobbyists-now 13 for each legislator. Only a handful represent children, and just one represents fulltime only the interests of children. Our lobbyists are part of a merry-go-round of job interchange between organized interests and state government staff. They arrange for campaign contributions for those with 6 or 8 year term limits, who will all need a large campaign fund to move to a different political office. And they so arrange in a state which allocates \$50 billion in public funds annually, and has no state campaign contribution or political spending limits whatever.

In this milieu, where is the road leading? Certainly it travels languidly through a world of territorial disputes between organized interests, such as trial lawyers vs. insurers, doctors vs. trial lawyers, and to close the circle- insurers vs. doctors. It leads toward proprietary short-term profit focus; and away from diffuse interests, away from future interests, away from our children.

Texas politician Ann Richards won cheers at the 1988 Democratic convention when she proclaimed: "George Bush was born standing on third base, and he thinks he hit a triple." I have news for the Democrats: We were almost all born on third base, and every one of us thinks he hit a triple. And we're all wrong. From building the one-room schoolhouse in the pioneer West, to saving so a son could be the first to own his own home, to that second job so a daughter could be the first to finish college, we have forged a proud tradition of sacrifice for our children. We were put on third base by 200 years of work by our parents, and theirs, and theirs before them.

We are now locked on a course of such selfish indulgence-both private reproductive irresponsibility and public disinvestment-that a new road must be cleared, one requiring daring and politically incorrect, decisive leadership-calling for both accountability, and sacrifice. The California's Children's Budget 1999-2000, a non-partisan 600-page compilation of empirical evidence on the status of children, state spending trends, and recommended needs, charts such a course. Compiled by the Children's Advocacy Institute, it documents the need to restore now the \$6 billion subtracted from children over the past 20 years, and it demands a renewal of private responsibility (www.cachildlaw.org).

The sacrifice it calls for is embarrassingly trivial compared to that made by those who came before us, less of a tax burden than our parents of 20 years paid as a percentage of their less affluent incomes. None of it was enacted in 1999. But whatever compass we use, whatever specific turns we take, the direction our children need will not come from the cacophony of advocates in Sacramento. It must be affirmatively fashioned by our public officials and monitored by an awakening populace.