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GOP Focus Should Be Kid Stuff

Republicans must see that their most important constituency is children

By Robert C. Fellmeth*

When my liberal colleagues learn I have been a registered Republican for 20 years, they look at me as if I had just been registered as a sex offender. But I have been persuaded by the GOP's traditional principles: democratic power closest to the people, checks and balances, civil liberties and equality of opportunity, family values -- a fluid society that respects the individual and fashions a path upward, based on hard work and contribution.

Those principles also include advocacy for children. Republicans understand that first and foremost, children need simply to be wanted -- and intended -- by two parents. Commitment from parents correlates closely with child health and happiness. Yet a third of California's births are to unwed mothers -- and it is not pregnant teens but adult women who account for the vast majority. And about 50% of births are unintended, according to the National Survey of Family Growth. Babies are born to women who want a teddy bear; they are the issue of men with the paternal commitment of salamanders.

Republicans have understood that "a village" cannot "raise a child" -- it takes a family. Too many Democrats view the world through the eyes of a social service establishment with a capacity to grow infinitely so that children become little more than pieces of paper sweeping across the desks of social workers.

And the history of the Republican Party gives us some cause for pride. We have opposed a large national debt, knowing that our children would be required to pay for it. We have sponsored school and other infrastructure investment and the GI Bill of Rights to give higher-education opportunity to a generation.

But something has gone terribly wrong. We have failed to live up to our commitment.

Going far beyond "limited government" principles, we have opposed the state reflexively. And we have adopted the proposition that lowering taxes stimulates the economy and generates more tax revenue. Ronald Reagan's biggest mistake was that mantra, and its result was the biggest deficit ever created.

If we were to take the percentage of adult personal income publicly invested in children in 1979 and commit the same percentage in 2003-04, we would spend more than \$18 billion more for our children than Gov. Gray Davis' budget proposes.

Instead, Republican and Democrats alike are agreeing to disinvest: cuts in education, although we are already in the bottom third in spending per child, and in health care, although more than 1 million kids lack coverage.

How could this be? Proposition 13 sensibly limits property taxes to 1% of assessed valuation,

but then it also inequitably limits valuations, so that those of us who bought our homes 20 years ago pay one-third, one-fourth, even one-tenth of the property taxes that our children now buying homes pay -- and that badly limits the revenue we generate as a state. On top of that, we have enacted what is now \$28 billion in state personal income tax breaks since 1998, mostly for the wealthy and older adults.

We have been right to criticize some public spending, such as \$1,000 payola from the governor for every 18-year-old who scores in the top 10% in state tests, but the cuts in the 2003-2004 budget go far beyond that.

Californians are among the richest folk in the world. And it is really not a question of adding more for our kids -- it is a question of not continuing to subtract from them. To do so, the DMV fee needs only to be restored to its 1998 level. Alcohol taxes need only to be raised to the national average. The wealthy need only pay the same percentage of income in taxes they paid years ago, when they were not nearly as well off.

Congress in 2001 relieved California adults of about \$27 billion per year in federal income taxes over the next decade, and now promises to reduce taxes by an additional \$8 billion to \$10 billion per year. How about sharing that reduction? California could take back half of the savings from the two tax cuts -- about \$18 billion -- to invest in children.

Without new revenue, our K-12 class sizes will again grow to the largest in the nation. How can we as Republicans defend that? How do we ethically defend cuts in basic medical services for our children? How can we propose billions in bonds and borrowing from future years in light of our traditions? Can the GOP leader have been serious when he said that any Republican who voted for any tax increase should be impeached?

A seminal test approaches, pitting sound-bite aphorisms about "tax and spend" against real values and real consequences. Republicans should demand that every cent of new money go for kids, not for pork barrel, cushy jobs for friends or to feed the social service establishment.

Once those conditions are met, we should work to ensure that the revenues are available. That is what Gov. Pete Wilson did in 1991 when he covered half of a less drastic shortfall with new revenues, and he left a legacy of class-size reduction that is bearing fruit now.

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