

Block Grants: Changing the Welfare Culture from the Ground Up

On January 23, 1995, Pioneer Institute Academic Advisory Board member, Professor Brigitte Berger, testified in Washington, D.C., before the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Oversight regarding welfare reform. Dr. Berger provided this committee, chaired by Rep. Nancy Johnson (R-CT), her appraisal of the constructive cultural changes that can be realized by vastly decentralizing the federal welfare system through the use of block grants to states. In the following pages, Pioneer has reproduced her testimony.

Professor Berger: Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee. Let me thank you for the opportunity to testify before this Committee. I am here today in a dual capacity: first as a sociologist from Boston University, having worked and written on issues related to the social institutions of family and community; and second, as a member of the Advisory Board of the Massachusetts-based Pioneer Institute, an independent non-profit public policy research organization.

The Welfare Establishment

The purpose of my testimony is to strongly endorse the use of unrestricted block grants in the overhaul of the national welfare system and to urge this Committee not to fall prey to the error of casting the issue of welfare reform in political and economic terms alone. A large set of data available today makes us recognize that three decades of federal interventionism have resulted in the creation of a culture of welfare dependency at the bottom of American society that is resistant to simple administrative and economic reform. It is therefore crucial to recognize that at this point welfare is driven by the cultural dimensions of dependency. If we wish to make a dent in the entrenched and continually spreading welfare culture, we will have to make use of culture-changing measures. Block grants, in my opinion, offer us the first, and perhaps the only available mechanism to effect this dynamic and pull the country out of its current welfare mess.

I won't dwell on the causes of the phenomenal rise in the welfare rolls--illegitimacy, teenage motherhood, single parenthood, delinquency, crime and substance abuse. It is also well known that the increase in children and women on welfare coincided with the explosion of federal child welfare programs--family planning, prenatal and postnatal care, child nutrition, child abuse prevention and treatment, child health and guidance, daycare, Headstart, in addition to the "big three" (AFDC, Medicaid and Food Stamps). Both individually and collectively, most, though not all, of these programs have fallen far short of producing their intended effects. The increasing numbers of children growing up in poverty are not measurably better off today than they were some thirty years ago, and all too many seem to be trapped in a life of poverty. Well-intentioned programs appear to have accomplished little more than making child welfare a purview of the federal government, with governmental coffers disgoring ever larger amounts of money with no end in sight.

Time and again, it has been demonstrated that this new welfare culture not only exerts an enormous drain on the national economy, but it is also destructive to individual lives. Moreover, the new culture of welfare dependency is morally unacceptable and fraught with perils for the nation's future. While the block-granting mechanism in and of itself cannot provide us with ready-made panaceas, it is a very important first step toward genuine welfare reform.

The Role of Culture

This line of argumentation, I would propose, is as commonsensical as it is straightforward. Once a culture--defined as people's behaviors, values and lifestyles--has come into existence, it starts to take on dynamics of its own. Once this happens, the ensuing state of affairs is extremely difficult to change. If lifestyle changes can be brought about at all, it is certainly not by government fiat. The bitter experience of the past decades has brought into stark relief the impotence of the federal government to accomplish this task. If productive cultural changes could be brought about simply by a combination of good intentions, money, and active involvement of the federal government, then surely the cornucopia of

federal programs that have been institutionalized across the country should have done the trick. However, the concept of "culture" as used in the social sciences, though not mysterious, refers to a more complex phenomenon. It is the spontaneous production of collective social life originating at the intersection of family, work, and voluntary associations taking place in any society. The problem with existing welfare policies is that they have discouraged precisely these vital elements of culture from doing their work.

The Debilitating Culture of Welfare

Permit me to elaborate on this argument briefly. In the culture of welfare dependency that has taken root in the wasteland of America's inner cities, the game of life is played out between isolated individuals at the bottom of society and large, distant bureaucracies at the top of the welfare state. Federal policies have bypassed the elements that had traditionally mediated between the individual and the state (e.g., family and voluntaristic institutions, such as informal neighborhood and ethnic associations and the churches). In the absence of vital input flowing from these mediating institutions, an anomic culture of dependency has been forged that prevents individuals from developing the habits of self-reliance and the capacity to plan for a future independent of government handouts. At the same time, those ensnared in this trap are hindered from taking advantage of educational and job opportunities. It is a culture characterized by fatalistic attitudes and chaotic lifestyles; a culture in which the language of entitlement has replaced the language of responsibility. It is contagious and produces a social ethos that stands in direct contradiction to precisely those norms and values that accounted for America's strength in the past. Contrary to all intentions, the welfare system in its 1960's liberal mode has cut all too many people from their familial moorings, isolated them from communal ties, deprived them of the spiritual and moral guidance of religious institutions, and driven them into an existential and psychological dependency on the state. It would be unfair to put the blame for the emergence of this phenomenon on federal intervention policies alone. Broad and poorly understood shifts in the normative order of society have transformed all segments of twentieth-century America with cataclysmic speed, regardless of their location in the social hierarchy. Yet despite a general discrediting of traditional virtues, the American middle classes have been able to withstand the most harmful effects of the turbulent 1960's and 1970's. Those living at the bottom of society have not. While massive interventionist practices may not have been solely responsible for the creation of welfare dependency, it is safe to argue that they certainly were instrumental in giving expression and shape to its formation. Hence it is justifiable to conclude that America's welfare classes are not victims of an unjust economy or a neglectful government. Rather, they are the victims of both ill-conceived interventionist efforts--the consequences of which neither the poor nor their welfare mentors expected--and general shifts in the normative order. It is heartbreaking to realize that well-intentioned efforts reinforced social norms which led to this dysfunctional welfare culture that we are now called upon to undo.

The Importance of Mediating Structures

There are no easy solutions for achieving this monumental task. Once the social fabric has been torn, there appears to be precious little government can do. If there is any hope for turning the present situation around, we are obliged to return to those ground-level mechanisms that have a proven track record in providing structure and meaning to an individual's life, namely the social institutions of family, community, and religion.

Let me say a few things about the role of the family. Common to all current debates on welfare reform is the central importance of the traditional family. A father, mother and child are tied to each other by bonds of mutual affection and obligations, living and striving together while pooling their resources. This realization is fairly recent and it pains me to say that federal policy, in its 1960's mode, has done more than its share to discredit the traditional family. Although two-parent families still form about half of the households below the poverty line at any given point in time, they rarely stay in poverty for extended periods, nor do they often show up among the homeless. Children in two-parent families have better starts in life than children from single-parent households, where fathers are totally absent or play only a minimal role in their lives. A huge set of data collected over the past three decades has shown that welfare dependency (along with a host of other pressing problems such as rampant youth crime and the catastrophic failure of public education) is rooted in profound shifts in the structure of the American family and its moral code. Statistics on separation, desertion, divorce and illegitimate births document the collapse of the two-parent family among the welfare-dependent class. More qualitative research points to

far-reaching changes in the welfare population's commitment to the family as an institution, attitudes toward work and authority, and the ability to defer gratification. Together these shifts have fused into an amalgam of influences with devastating consequences for the burgeoning numbers of persistently poor.

Framework for Change

How to turn this situation around is one of the most pressing questions before the nation. The children and women of the welfare-dependent class are certainly unable to achieve this on their own; and adopting punitive governmental policies will not help those who are too young to help themselves. A vast social science literature attests to the capacity of religious and other informal community institutions to bring about changes in the values and behavior of individuals and groups. Although the relevance of mediating institutions has long been recognized, they have been weakened by policy experts sitting at distant planning boards. The community programs designed by the poverty warriors of the 1960's and 1970's point to the futility of parachuting programs--and their organizers--into distinctive communities, and ignoring precisely those institutions that stand at the core of individual and communal life. In divorcing the issue of welfare from the exigencies of family, community dynamics, and accepted standards of morality, these programs merely served to turn welfare into a support system that individuals have learned to feel entitled to, irrespective of their lifestyle choices. Today, when we turn once more to local initiatives, we should remember the disastrous history of past efforts that circumvented those forces responsible for stable and productive communities.

There is no question about the necessity for government to protect and provide for children and others that cannot rely on those who should be their natural protectors and providers. In light of the grim experiences of the past, however, it is doubtful that federal bureaucracies are up to the task. While basic individual rights must be guaranteed and enforced at the national level, it makes eminent sense to decentralize public power from the federal government, and shift it to smaller units closer to the targeted problems. I believe it is of great importance that block grants to the states come with as few restrictions as possible. The precise mix of federal restrictions and mandates, on the one hand, and the discretionary power of individual states, on the other, is still an open question that will have to be carefully worked out. Yet one thing is already perfectly clear today: federal interference must be kept at a minimum. In the absence of fool-proof recipes for changing the welfare culture, states must be allowed and encouraged to explore those programs best suited to deal with unique, local problems. Only in this manner can efforts be identified that have the potential to change welfare-dependent behavior and create dynamics supportive of community development.

Fears have been voiced in recent weeks that without the protection of federal entitlement legislation the poor will be at the mercy of uncaring states and mean communities. Such fears sound hollow in the face of strong evidence to the contrary. This nation, more than any other I know can be rightly proud of its voluntaristic tradition. It is this tradition that accounts for America's strength and uniqueness. An extraordinary degree of compassion, responsibility, and tolerance continues to thrive in all sectors of American society. Failure to grant considerable discretionary powers to the states would severely defeat the very purpose of the block grant initiative. More importantly, such federal restrictions would, in all likelihood, interfere with the culture-building dynamics needed for achieving genuine and lasting welfare reform.

My recommendation is further informed by the acknowledgment of the role of religion in transforming individual values and behavior. We know from the available data and our experience that nothing can compete with religion in effecting lasting changes in the behavior of individuals. This approach to religion, however, runs counter to the highly secular interpretation of the First Amendment favored by the courts since the early 1960's. While nothing is further from my mind than to argue for some new establishment of religion by the state, I think that the law should not inhibit states from making use of the guidance and sustenance-providing capacity of an institution central to the lives of most Americans. The historical evidence documenting the role of religious institutions in incorporating generations of poor and destitute people into the mainstream of American society is too well known to this body to be trotted out once more.

The assertion that federal legislation should not interfere with religion's behavior-changing and culture-building potential is likely to bring about a major political battle. The fate of America's welfare population, however, demands immediate action and cannot wait on the outcome of prolonged disputes. Unrestricted block grants to the states, I would argue, allow for renewed deliberation and sorting of "church and state" issues in more manageable settings.

The identification of mechanisms that promise productive changes in the current culture of welfare dependency undergirds my support of block grants. Converting the federally financed and administered welfare system into unrestricted block grants to the states is the necessary first step in reversing the forces that have unintentionally turned welfare into an institution that feeds on itself. For genuine welfare reform to occur, however, it will be up to the individual states to carry the task of reform yet one step further. A number of states currently working under waivers are already exploring new and promising avenues to achieve welfare reform. Additionally, states should reach out to municipalities, businesses, and private groups in order to encourage initiatives of a scale consonant with the distinctive needs of their welfare population. Common sense leads us to believe--and the research data confirm--that local and ethically inspired initiatives are our single best hope to bring about the much needed reforms that can liberate the welfare population.

Brigitte Berger, Professor of Sociology at Boston University, has published widely on children, family, values, education, and welfare. She was a contributing author to Pioneer's recent publication, *Agenda for Leadership*, and served as a judge for the Institute's 1994 Better Government Competition on welfare reform.

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