



# WHO'S MORE COMPASSIONATE: THE LEFT OR THE RIGHT?

WILLIAM VOEGELI

What's the major difference between liberals and conservatives? For liberals the answer is easy. Liberals are compassionate and conservatives are mean.

"I am a liberal," public radio host Garrison Keillor wrote in 2004, "and liberalism is the politics of kindness." President Barack Obama agrees. "Kindness covers all of my political beliefs," he has said.

Earlier in his political career, Senator Obama urged college students "to broaden your ambit of concern and empathize with the plight of others."

If liberalism is the politics of kindness, it follows that conservatism must be the opposite – heartless.

New York Times columnist Paul Krugman contends that conservatives want to limit government spending on social welfare programs because they take "positive glee in inflicting further suffering on the already miserable." Is this characterization fair? Is it accurate? Hardly.

For one thing, helping others—generosity—requires resources to be generous with. To provide needy people tangible assistance, as opposed to inconsequential gestures, requires wealth. And wealth has to be created before it can be donated.

This necessity, however, complicates the politics of kindness. Both economic theory and the historical record of different, competing economic systems, clearly show that the best way to create wealth is to narrow, rather than broaden, "the ambit of our concern." Adam Smith, the founder of modern economics, wrote in 1776, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest."

Our natural desire to care more for our families and friends than for distant strangers is not a moral defect, but an advantage. Free markets and voluntary associations, such as churches and civic groups, make the most of this asset. The welfare state tears it down.

There is, then, a glaring contradiction in the politics of kindness: On the one hand, liberals frequently criticize the "selfishness" of people preoccupied with building careers, businesses, and investments. On the other, liberals are bursting with ideas for all the humane things government can do by redistributing the wealth created by these so-called selfish people.

There's another contradiction. Liberals champion government action as the best vehicle to alleviate suffering. At the same time, they are uninterested in the question of whether these

government programs actually do alleviate suffering.

To take just one example, the government's own studies have demonstrated that the federal pre-school program Head Start does not achieve its goals. Children enrolled in it are no better off by the end of the first grade than those children who don't enroll. But this program has lost none of its liberal luster. On the contrary, liberals constantly call for its expansion.

Our federal, state, and local governments spend more than \$3.2 trillion per year on programs designed to prevent or relieve poverty. That's more than \$10,000 per American. Yet the official poverty rate has fluctuated in the same narrow range, from 11 to 15 percent of the population, for the past 40 years.

How can the politics of kindness be so cavalier about whether government efforts to alleviate suffering succeed? The problem is not a deficiency of compassion, but the defective moral logic of compassion itself.

The word "compassion" means, literally, "suffering together with another."

And there's the problem.

The whole point of compassion is for empathizers to feel better when the awareness of another's suffering distresses the observer. But this ultimate purpose does not guarantee that those who are the object of empathy will fare better.

So, on top of all its other problems, our \$3 trillion welfare state doesn't work because its liberal architects and defenders don't really care whether it works.

The liberal asks, "Does it feel good?"

The conservative asks, "Does it do good?"

If you really want to help people, it should be pretty obvious which is the more important question.

I'm Bill Voegeli, of the Claremont Institute, for Prager University.