

The "public option" in the liberal-progressive tradition

Written by Dr. Ron Daniels

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One of the things I have come to lament about this and previous Democratic administrations is the failure to uphold and educate the American people about the liberal-progressive tradition that has produced so many milestone benefits for workers, the poor, the middle class and people of color minorities. It is as if the conservatives have totally intimidated the left into hiding from its history of successfully advocating for ordinary people in the face of the avaricious forces of profit and greed.

As I was concluding the final session of my class in American Government at York College, City University of New York, we discussed the differences between Liberalism and Conservatism as these political philosophies have emerged in contemporary politics. In attempting to draw the distinction, I suggested that liberals and progressives have traditionally viewed government as a vehicle to improve the lives of workers, the poor and the middle class and to protect people from the excesses of laissez-faire Capitalism. Liberals and progressives have viewed government or what I term the "public space" as the "great equalizer" in this Capitalist political economy.

On the other hand, Conservatives have traditionally disparaged government as an instrument to ameliorate the condition of workers, poor people and the middle class, arguing instead that when left alone the "market" will lift people from all strata of society and solve the ills of the nation. Hence, for conservatives government essentially exists to advance the interests of private sector business and financial interests which they believe will eventually benefit all.

As Adam Cohen reminds us in a recent article in the New York Times, the New Deal is perhaps the best historical example of the use of "public power" to check the amoral behavior of private sector interests.

Time and time again, FDR supported, proposed and implemented "public options" to improve the quality of life for ordinary people - generally over the strident objection of conservatives. Cohen sites the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Rural Electrification Administration (REA), Farm Credit Administration (FCA) and Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) as examples of the use of public power to advance the interests of ordinary people. He could have also mentioned the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) and Works Progress Administration (WPA) as illustrations of government acting aggressively to provide employment for large numbers of people by creating public sector jobs as an option of last resort.

As President Obama and the Democrats scramble to respond to the crisis of joblessness which is threatening to render them a minority party again in next year's mid-term elections, I am befuddled as to why there is an unwillingness to boldly reclaim the righteous tradition of using public power to address the needs of ordinary people. In addition to begging the same financial sector that created the crisis to lend more to homeowners and small businesses, why don't the Democrats enact a massive public sector jobs program? Hundreds of thousands of the unemployed could be put to work on public works and other socially productive projects. It is as if liberals and progressives have amnesia about their record of rescuing workers from crises of high unemployment/joblessness.

In 1973 the Democrats spearheaded an effort to create the Comprehensive Training and Employment Act (CETA) "to train workers and provide them with jobs in the public service."

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The program was targeted to the chronically unemployed, low income people and youth. Hundreds of thousands of young people, particularly in inner-city Black communities, got their first job through CETA.

Thousands of older workers were retrained, had a paycheck and eventually rejoined the private sector job market because there was a public option. The CETA program was eventually changed to the Joint Training and Partnership Act (JTPA) with states taking on the major responsibility for implementing the program. Today Democrats seem to have no recollection of CETA or JTPA.

Of even greater significance, by the 80's Democrats were bold enough to suggest that anything other than temporary unemployment was unacceptable. Congressman Augustus Hawkins of the Congressional Black Caucus and Hulbert Humphrey, the "liberal lion" of his day, teamed up to promote the concept of a full employment economy through the Hawkins-Humphrey Full Employment and Balanced Growth Act. The Act stipulated that an unemployment rate of no more than 3 - 4% was temporarily tolerable. The ultimate goal was zero unemployment. The Act further stipulated that if the private sector could not generate sufficient jobs to eradicate unemployment, the federal government could "create a reservoir of public employment."

Hopefully, someone will soon give the liberals, progressives and the Democrats a refresher course in the use of public power, public options to ameliorate the ravishes of unemployment and other ills of an economy dominated by greed-driven interests. By creating a pool of public service jobs and targeting the communities with the highest levels of unemployment in locales like Baltimore and New York, President Obama and the Democrats could address the horrific crises of joblessness in these cities without ever uttering the word "Black." However, it remains to be seen whether liberals and progressives will have the guts to reclaim their heritage/tradition and enact a public sector jobs program. I'm not holding my breath!

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