

RHODE ISLAND AND HOPE LOST

The House of Representatives last Wednesday evening made critical budget decisions that will literally take away hope from thousands of children, families and individuals living in Rhode Island. This was a non-partisan effort. The Haves have once again triumphed over the Have Nots. There were other choices that could have been made. We refused to repeal the Flat Tax and to repeal recent changes to the Capitol Gains Tax both of which only benefit Rhode Island's wealthier individuals. We also continue to provide generous tax incentives to large corporations in the guise of creating a warm and inviting business climate for economic growth and good jobs. But what is wrong with this picture? In the last eight years, has Rhode Island gained good jobs? Has our economy improved? Are you, the reader, economically better off than you were eight years ago?

In the process of making cuts to healthcare and cash assistance to Rhode Island's most needy, we have created an atmosphere of lost hope. The relatively small savings contained by cuts to human service programs, much of which come from federal dollars, will be greatly amplified by real mental and physical pain by thousands of people. Opportunities have been greatly diminished and the very soul of collective Rhode Islanders, has been diminished as well.

The path we have chosen may be best exemplified by the portrayal of "Pottersville" in the movie classic "It's a Wonderful Life" starring Jimmy Stewart. In this fictional city, greed and obtainment of wealth is all that matters. The needy are shunned and life exist without hope. To understand this process better, I also recommend a little known and little published short work by Charles Dickens; "A Walk in the Workhouse", which describes in great detail "...the dragon called Pauperism". Capitalism, the economic engine that so many of us reap the rewards from, guarantees that a fair amount of people will live in or near poverty. Its' only purpose is to create an environment for people to make money, for corporate leaders to ensure profit for stockholders and, in many cases, to beat out competition. **What it's not, is a thought out social program designed to help people who can not, for whatever reason, compete effectively in our competitive commercial world or who are shut out because there are not enough good jobs available.**

Capitalism can be a wonderful thing, until you are poor, old with limited resources, or have a disability. On the other hand, I and most Rhode Islanders have certainly benefitted from the free market place and without it, no programs for the poor would exist. So, how can both these concepts be true at the same time? Capitalism is not good or bad in itself, it is what we make it and how we use it.

History can be very enlightening. In 1788, when Alexander Hamilton was asked; "Why has government been instituted at all?" He replied:

"Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice, without constraint."

In 1859, Old Abe Lincoln once stated in one of his campaign speeches;

".....We are in the midst of the eternal struggle between two principles, one concerns the Right of Humanity, the other.....the Divine Right of Kings. That is to say, it is that you toil and work to put the bread on your table andI'll eat it."

Hamilton's quote speaks to the inability of many proponents of the free market place to make wise or coordinated choices regarding basic human needs. Left without reasonable regulation, the free market place often succumbs to actions in the name of "progress" and results in ineffective anti-poverty programs and environmental disaster. Abe Lincoln's quote refers to the rights and privileges developed and guarded by the elite class in relation to those same basic human needs and furthermore intimates that the rich have gotten that way by the labor of those less fortunate.

The choices our elected leaders have made will come back to negatively affect all of Rhode Islanders and will cause great pain for many. These choices will not only impact the poor, but also the middle class as we lose many well paying jobs from the healthcare industry, public service, and even the private sector. The path to creating a healthy business climate in Rhode Island, is not by giving money back to the wealthy, providing tax expenditures without accountability, or cutting needed services. In the end corporations, large and small business, human service organizations, the poor and recently arrived individuals, are all just people. We may be counted as numbers, but we have identities and interdependent relationships. Not one of us is truly independent. We live, work, and take care of our families through helping each other. Not one rich person got rich without the help of others, either through the labor of workers or through commercial means.

Many people living in poverty, cannot partake in the basic right of the land "The Pursuit of Happiness", which includes survival. It is the essential ingredient in every civilized community that help is given to those in need. A community can not survive without taking care of those in need. Rhode Island has always demonstrated a great compassion. As we go forth down the path set by our elected officials last week, the very vitality of our community is greatly threatened. These changes can not be seen as permanent and need to be reversed within the next year. I ask that you ask potential legislators in the fall election, just how they intend to put back in place needed social support programs, such as health care and welfare cash assistance beyond the new limits set last week. Also ask how they are going to help improve the business climate and right Rhode Island's economic ship.

Cutting welfare assistance to twenty four months in a five year period, separating thousands of children from the healthcare they need, and blaming the poor and immigrants for our commercial policy failures, is not the kind of assistance that Rhode Island needs. And, we will pay for these policy decisions many times over. We have failed our obligation to humanity. The results of our thoughtlessness and callousness will be very bad indeed and will permeate all of our lives in a way that we have yet to imagine. We need to live up to Rhode Island's motto "Hope" and re-create a community based on humanity, compassion and thoughtfulness. With these overlaying principles in mind, we will also be creating a climate futile for business development. People, regardless of wealth or diverse backgrounds will want to live here.

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