

Time to eliminate free lunches

Pay attention, people. These next few months have the potential to be the most exciting, in terms of government reform, than the past several years. Whether or not that happens remains to be seen.

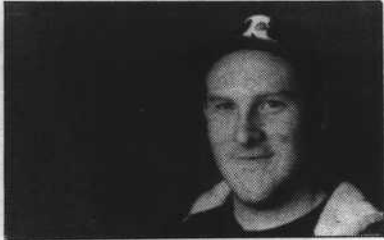
The Republicans, having seized control of Congress, hope to change the condition of America, both socially and economically. They plan to hit all of our "hot" buttons, and though that may appease the public's anger temporarily, it may, in the long run, turn out to be a nationwide catastrophe.

The biggest issue on the agenda is welfare reform. This is a branch of government that has needed a complete overhaul for some time. It's too late for a tune-up and, hopefully, Washington is fully aware of that fact.

I like the idea of limiting welfare recipients to five years of eligibility during a lifetime. This would eliminate much waste in the way of welfare lifers, those folks who remain on the system indefinitely.

There are many people who drain and leech off of the American taxpayers by abusing a program that initially was set up to aid those who could not obtain employment. The idea of welfare is good, but, as with everything, people have found a way to destroy it.

Take, for instance, my hometown of Chicago. The inner city is rotting away with high crime and unemployment, and welfare is not helping the problem. Quite simply, there are too many people who know that they can use the system, not have to work or lift a finger and still get that check every month. The system is even set up to award a mother if she brings more children into the world, children



Michael Justice

that more often than not end up on the streets with little or no education, skills or usefulness to society. Remember that recent incident when 19 children were found fighting the dogs and rats for food in their one-bedroom apartment? One of the mothers who lived there was in the hospital giving birth to yet another child when the police took the kids away.

More babies, more money.

We as a society cannot afford this sort of irresponsibility any longer. We have allowed too many people the luxury of being lazy and siphoning much-needed funds away from other social programs, such as Medicaid, that deserve it. Why should the working class continually support those who refuse to help themselves?

Now, I should point out that I am not opposed to helping those with genuine needs. However, the current system does more damage than good, and therefore needs to be thrown out. It would be like replacing a car engine. The body (idea) is fine; it just needs new internals.

For example, single mothers who have children and are unable to work because they can't afford to pay for child care should receive assistance. But instead of keeping the mother at home watching television, we should have a

program to pay for day care, which would enable her to go to work and be a productive member of society.

I disagree with President Clinton's idea of job training for those individuals who are currently on welfare. His program would cost in excess of \$9 billion, and that's too much.

Instead, offer to pay for their education at a local community college, where the cost would not be so high. An associate's degree, which takes two years to earn, would cost approximately \$1,000 to \$1,500 per person. This could even be set up as a loan. While these folks go to school, there could be a job-placement service set up to help them find work.

Going to school and working, too. Sound familiar? Thousands of us do it every day. Many of you even have kids or spouses that need your time. It can be done.

I suppose that's why I have little sympathy for those leaning on the rest of us. There are days when I wish I could just do nothing, but I can't. I've made a commitment to myself to get an education, regardless of the work and sacrifices involved.

When people are allowed to do something, they will do it for as long as you let them. Just like children, they react predictably when no discipline is enforced. It's time to change the way we think. It's time to eliminate the free lunches and help people where they really need it.

Dignity. Self-worth. Pride. These, not handouts, are the building blocks for a stronger America.

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US, Britain share common ills, cures

The United States and Great Britain have long behaved like twins separated at birth. When one catches a cold, the other one sneezes.

Consider politics. Like President Clinton, Prime Minister John Major is troubled by dissension within his Conservative Party having to do with his leadership. Like Clinton, Major is pointing toward the improving economy as evidence that his party is better than the other one to lead the country in the new year.

Like America, Britain is wrestling with how to reform its welfare system, which, according to the Institute of Economic Affairs, fosters irresponsibility, leading to fatherless children and, for many of them, a life of violent crime.

One recent poll showed 61 percent viewed the Conservative Party as "sleazy and disreputable," and the Gallup organization discovered that, after 15 years in power, the Conservatives are widely regarded as having lost their ethical bearings.

Still, a Christmas-week poll found 75 percent of Britons optimistic about 1995, and Prime Minister Major is hoping to capitalize on this by announcing a tax cut in the near future.

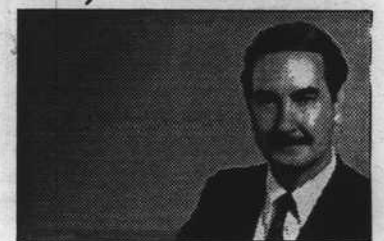
Like America, though, something dark and foreboding lies just beneath the surface in Britain, where severe winter storms and year-end flooding are an omen for what may be worse days to come.

The recently retired vice president of the European Parliament, Sir Fred Catherwood, thinks "British society has gone badly wrong." He says people are beginning to look back to a time when economics were less important than safe streets, strong families and fuller employment, and children were expected to finish school.

"We look back today," he says, "because we dare not look forward. We live in a violent, greedy, rootless, cynical and hopeless society, and we don't know what is to become of it all."

Catherwood is doubtful that government, whether led by Conservatives or Labour, can reverse the downward trend. He believes the decline in British society has two causes, both of which have resulted from a loss of spiritual moorings. Britain is ahead of the United States on this, but America is gaining rapidly.

Cause No. 1: Greed, which Catherwood says comes from the disbelief in life after death: "We grab what we can while we can,



Cal Thomas

however we can, and then hold on to it hard."

Cause No. 2: Moral confusion. Catherwood explained: "The denial of universal moral absolutes is as politically correct here as in America. The powerful use their power and the weak go to the wall, not just the poor, but the weak-willed, and especially all the children, who depend on the age-old disciplines, and loving care of the family."

Catherwood is not content to simply analyze the problem. After a distinguished political career, he has decided to get his hands dirty and do something about it.

The Evangelical Alliance is forming City Action Networks, in which local churches will pool human and material resources to help those who have been blown over by the heavy cultural winds in this rootless society. Each church that signs on to participate in City Actions Networks will either handle the problem of an individual or family itself, or pass them along to another church with the proper expertise.

There will be a public announcement as each urban network is ready so that local politicians, civic leaders and the press are aware of what is being done.

The goal, says Catherwood, is to identify the churches "as part of the community, not an exclusive private club."

If British churches are able to bring this off, they will do something American churches could and should have done long ago. Instead of concentrating on building palaces of brick and glass, American churches (and churchgoers) should consider what is happening here — a reassessment of the reason for the churches' existence, which is not about building edifices, political kingdoms or institutions, but about building lives.

It would be a most welcome trend — in Britain and America — if people would begin to see government aid as a last stop, not the first stop, and the moral resuscitation of people as the honorable obligation of the churches and not primarily of the government

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No one safe from assumptions

False assumptions mean nothing to an insensitive person. They can mean too much to a sensitive person.

No matter where you go. No matter who you are. Everyone is subject to people making false assumptions about them. No one is safe from that.

There is, however, a midway point somewhere between insensitivity and sensitivity. Finding that point is kind of tricky. Some assumptions are racist, hateful and dumb. Other assumptions are just plain dumb. But do they all hurt a person's feelings?

When I walk down a darkened street at night and approach a white person walking alone, one of three things will happen: They will either cross the street, watch my every move or act as though they're really in a hurry. That used to hurt me. It doesn't bother me so much anymore. I found that midway point.

The more I think about it, the more it makes sense. When I go to New York or even Omaha, that's the way I treat everyone I meet on the street.

People make all kinds of assumptions about other people. Crossing the street to avoid me isn't against me personally. It is simply a choice a person makes that has absolutely nothing to do with me. They really don't do me any harm. I don't want my every reaction to what white people do conjuring up my anger about 400 years of oppression. That's a lot of anger.

I don't want to be too sensitive. There are many more important aspects of society deserving my attention — slavery, legal segregation and Native American genocide, to name a few.

Think about it. A person might



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cross the street because they assume that since I'm black, I'm going to kill or rob them. What real harm have they done? That isn't someone I'd want to share the sidewalk with anyway. Besides, that probably wasn't the only stupid assumption that person made that day.

The kind of people who cross the street when they see me coming probably also assume lots of other stupid things. For example, they may assume that all fundamentalist Christians raise their children to be homophobic. They might assume that absent white fathers are more responsible than absent black fathers. That same person might also assume that white women are mostly raped by black men. God only knows what crazy assumptions people might make on a daily basis.

I recently made a couple of stupid assumptions about a foreign classmate of mine. One afternoon last semester we were sharing weekend horror stories about our statistics homework. Both of us had spent the entire weekend attempting to solve a statistics problem with a flawed formula.

Neither of us realized our error until class the following week. Needless to say, we felt like total idiots. I was surprised at his having trouble because I had wrongly assumed (because of his race) that the class would be a cinch for him.

We laughed about it and talked

about how ridiculous we felt. Both of us had faithfully done the computations. We both had tried for hours to solve the problem, not knowing that it was impossible. While waiting for class to begin, we continued to laugh.

"Keystone Cops!" I said. My classmate, a Chinese citizen of Malaysia said, "What?" I assumed he didn't know what I meant and proceeded to explain it to him.

"You know, Charlie Chaplin. Laurel and Hardy. Slipping on banana peels ... someone leaves a banana peel on the ground, which will inevitably cause someone else to fall."

He said, "Yes, I know this." I suddenly realized that he knew exactly what I was talking about. I could have died right there. I had assumed that because he was Chinese, he needed a lesson in comedy. I felt like a damn fool. But it was too late.

Perhaps my ignorance was innocent. It was too late to explain that I had several friends from Malaysia. (As if that mattered.) It was too late to apologize for assuming so much. It was too late to explain to him that I had spent a lifetime listening to other people's dumb assumptions about me.

I wanted to correct myself, but I didn't want to apologize too strongly. He was gracious about it. He didn't want me to be too embarrassed.

"That's all right. It's no problem. No problem," he kept saying. "You're too kind..." I said. "For all I know, bananas grow on trees in Malaysia. I bet you have all kinds of comedy in your country."

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Ed Gamble