

Which Way, Senator Lieberman?

July 30, 2001

"As long as there is always a secular alternative and as long as no one is required to participate in religious observances, faith-based organizations can provide jobs and job training, counseling and mentoring, food and basic medical care. They can do so with public funds and without having to alter the religious character that is so often the key to their effectiveness. I believe that we should extend this carefully tailored approach to other vital services where faith-based organizations [FBOs] can play a role, such as drug treatment, homelessness, and youth violence prevention."—Vice President Al Gore to the Salvation Army, 1999.

Many were encouraged by the bipartisanship evidenced by Al Gore's embrace of charitable choice. "Gore's stance" remarked Joe Loconte of the Heritage Foundation, "marks a repudiation of the anti-religious bigotry that has dominated liberal forces for at least a generation. This hollow secularism of liberal government has run its course. That is a watershed." The more skeptical, however, thought Gore's move was merely a political ploy to try to steal the political thunder from Governor Bush's embrace of charitable choice and compassionate conservatism. Jean Bethke Elshtain of the University of Chicago Divinity School remarked, "It's hard to imagine the party of Barbra Streisand signing on with [charitable choice]" (*American Enterprise Magazine*, June 2000).

Which was it: watershed reversal or political ploy? Would the Democratic leadership walk the walk as well as talk the talk? Many Democrats voted to expand charitable choice on various occasions since passage of the 1996 bill. But would they challenge the powerful strict separationist element in the party? Though they supported charitable choice legislation, which explicitly repudiated radical separationism, they never said why the separationists were wrong in principle.

Now, after the debate in the House of Representatives and the subsequent party line vote over the Faith-Based Initiative (H.R. 7) on July 19, it is increasingly difficult to avoid the cynical interpretation of the Democratic leadership's strategy. Those who opposed H.R. 7 did so precisely *because* the legislation protected the "religious character" of FBOs (as Gore said it should), particularly in their employment decisions. The legislation now faces similar objections in the Democratically-controlled Senate, and Sen. Joe Lieberman seems to be aligning himself with the separationists.

Despite the fact that earlier charitable choice legislation, signed by President Clinton and endorsed by Gore and Lieberman, included precisely the type of employment protections they now oppose, Lieberman and most Democrats appear to have adopted the view of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, People for the American Way, the ACLU and the gay-rights lobby. The latter groups in particular insist that FBOs, such as the Salvation Army, should not be allowed to refuse to hire practicing homosexuals. Are congressional Democrats repudiating what Gore-Lieberman campaigned for in 2000?

Because protecting the integrity of FBOs has been the centerpiece of all charitable choice legislation from the beginning, it appears that Elshtain and other skeptics may be right that the earlier Democratic embrace of charitable choice was merely a political ploy. Yet perhaps it is not too late for Sen. Lieberman to recover his earlier political courage and lead the Democrats to higher ground. We will soon find out, because he will likely play a major role in drafting Senate legislation to expand charitable choice. If Sen. Lieberman caves in on the issue of protecting the integrity of FBOs, we will have reason to doubt his viability as a responsible leader among Senate Democrats and as a potential presidential candidate. And we will then know that the Democratic Party has become the party of Barry Lynn and the radical separationists.

—Keith Pavlischek, *Fellow*

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