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# P E R S P E C T I V E S

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## The Real “Right to Life”

### *Manchin's fear of an “Entitlement Society”*

*Roe v. Wade* appears to be on its last legs. The current, radical, Supreme Court sits poised to riddle *Roe* with Texas-sized exceptions or to overturn it all together. Ever since *Roe* was handed down on January 22, 1973, the press has been full of, and our national politics traumatized by, charges and counter-charges concerning the “right to life.” What is at stake in this current Supreme Court term is whether a woman has a right to control her own body in consultation with her private physician, or whether women will lose that right and be forced to act as baby machines because external political forces are allowed to impose their narrow view of morality on the rest of us.

Unfortunately, however, even that tragic confrontation isn't the “*real*” right to life issue. The October 5<sup>th</sup> execution of Earnest L. Johnson, a man so mentally retarded he could not possibly possess the adequate intelligence to understand the nature of his act, such that even Pope Francis attempted to intervene in his execution, was unconstitutional under US law as well as international law. Where was his “Right to Life”? And yet, even that political “crime” fails to examine the deeper issues that any conversation about the “right to life” ought to address.

Last week Senator **Joe Manchin**, a “Blue Dog Democrat” if ever there was one (and a guy who continues to make millions every year off the coal industry!), suggested that he would only allow one of three programs intended to help the poor amongst us deal with childcare and the financial burdens of raising a family. Why? Because Manchin believes in a Puritan Work Ethic that says, “if you want to eat you have to work.” And, adds a corollary, that the harder you work in a conventional way, the more you are allowed to eat (i.e., the greater percentage of total wealth you are allowed to accumulate).

It makes no sense that now, at a time where robotization is eliminating massive numbers of jobs (look at what is about to happen to the long-haul trucking business as companies purchase autonomously driven 18 wheelers), we are worried about how hard a person works. The French have already gone to an official 35-hour workweek so they can accommodate more employees in the workforce. That is a very smart idea—but doesn't go far enough. And that's precisely what Manchin is afraid of.

Manchin was castigated in a recent *New York Times* editorial for railing against what he calls “an entitlement society,” which quoted him making the embarrassing statement, “I don't believe that we should turn our society into an entitlement society.” What does he mean by that? Could he possibly be so cruel that he feels no societal collective responsibility for America's 1.38 million homeless children? Aren't they *entitled* to live in an adequate “home”, so they might have a chance at a full life? Does Manchin mean that everyone should struggle and work hard or otherwise be left in the gutter in a Dickensian return to the desperate conditions of the David Copperfield “workhouse”? What kind of a society is that?

Do we really want more unsheltered people on our streets when the evidence is overwhelming that it only costs *half* as much to provide free housing as it does to handle people who live rough on the street? Who doesn't want to save fifty percent of what we are spending *and* get a more humane result? Everyone except

those who cling to an obscure Puritan Work Ethic morality proposition: *you work, or you starve*. If that ethic was ever effective for the Puritans, it certainly isn't true today.

Why do we choose to harness untold numbers of people to a grindstone they'd just as soon leave behind? Particularly if we understood that their leaving that grindstone behind would leave the rest of us better off for the transition. There is no moral justification for homelessness or hunger in our country. We are capable of feeding and housing every human being in our society. Isn't it time we started seeing those who, for whatever reason, would prefer to not harness themselves to the grindstone (or find it impossible to do so) of 'traditional work life' as fully human rather than some sort of undeserving sub-species? Those people struggling on our streets are, after all, *human*. Doesn't that mean something?

Don't we see that our inability to relate to their inability or unwillingness to do what we all do every day is not only devoid of compassion, but also of reason? And that's not even counting all the people who accidentally fall through "the cracks" in society and need temporary extra support from our fabulous food banks and other social institutions that shore up those who need a temporary, or permanent, extra helping hand.

Manchin is blocking universal healthcare. He's blocking universal childcare so that parents can work even as toddlers gain a better first step on the rung of life despite the economic situation of their parents. He's blocking a permanent reduction in drug costs. He's blocking better transportation options, and he's blocking the elimination of fossil fuels in better transportation systems. Yet, we *all are entitled* to such things.

Is that what Manchin means by an Ebenezer Scrooge-like disdain for an "Entitlement Society"? If so, we should all strongly demand creating one! Creating an Entitlement Society that provides for its less fortunate members, so they don't starve or go homeless. In addition, all humans should be entitled to receive adequate education, and adequate medical attention, and adequate clothing. It is the minimum we should all expect of each other in a caring society. Our *fellow humans* are *entitled* to these basic human necessities.

The *real* "right to life" is that we won't let you starve in our streets, or freeze unsheltered in our night air, nor will we deny education to all children regardless of the financial position of their parents. That is not who *we* are. It isn't about "them." It's about us, and the standard we want to hold ourselves to as moral human beings.

The *Real* right to life argument needs to go like this: the fact you live here entitles you to actually be able to *live*. It enriches our lives to know that we compassionately care for each and every human being despite whatever life choices, good or "bad", that they have made. That caring defines who we are—not how "they" are lacking.

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