A Measure of Compassion

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It is easy to mock George W. Bush's call for a "compassionate conservatism." The serious question, though, is whether Bush can weave together conservative principles and compassion to form a coherent and compelling governing philosophy. Leading Democrats seem certain that the answer is no.

One school of Democratic thought, exemplified by journalist Mickey Kaus, holds that a national campaign based on compassion is a surefire loser. Compassion, Kaus argued recently in The New York Times, condescends to those to whom it is offered, refuses to draw distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving poor, and bases social programs on a fragile, fickle impulse. Let the Republicans keep compassion, Kaus concluded, and let the Democrats be the party that justifies activist government as the expression of "proud, free working citizens."

The other Democratic camp, represented by former New York Governor Mario Cuomo, believes that compassion is the core value of Democrats, not Republicans. "Governor Bush's description of compassion," Cuomo wrote in the Times shortly after Kaus, "will do more for the Democrats' case than it could possibly do for his own." Cuomo reasoned that Bush's promise to help the sick and the elderly, struggling families, and poor children is bound to ring hollow with Bush's core constituency but will resonate powerfully with Vice President Al Gore's agenda and audience.

Though each raises a serious doubt about compassionate conservatism, both Kaus and Cuomo may be selling it short. Kaus, in describing compassion as condescending, undiscriminating, and fragile, mistakes the pitfalls and perversions of compassion for the real thing. Moreover, his advice to Democrats to argue for the strengthening of social programs only by appealing to the self-interest of proud, free workers is itself condescending, treating the ill and the impoverished as if they were proud and free. Compassion is easily abused but often necessary and appropriate. A wise compassion invites us to treat individuals in great need as capable of becoming proud and free and worthy of concern even if they are not.

Cuomo belittles compassionate conservatism because he believes that "the two ideas it links aren't a good marriage." Indeed, the match may be neither obvious nor a case of love at first sight. But, in purporting to discern an insuperable opposition between compassion and

conservatism, Cuomo rudely and shortsightedly denies his opponents access to a basic human quality. He also forgets that, while like may flourish with like, it is also true that opposites can not only attract but also complement.

When it comes to compassion, Bush, in some ways, has an advantage over Democrats. Unlike Kaus, who, burned by past Democratic excesses and apparently still smarting, would now fly to the other extreme and altogether eliminate compassion from politics, Bush, who has cut taxes and reformed welfare in Texas, can afford to give compassion its due because he has proved his commitment to restraint and discipline in government. And, in contrast to Cuomo, who (like the McGovern-era Democrats Kaus mocks) puts compassion at the core of politics, Bush presents compassion as a modifier to his conservatism, not as its essence.

To be sure, the campaign so far has not yet demonstrated how serious Bush is about his compassion–or whether he will be able to honor his conservative principles while advancing the cause of the most vulnerable among us. But, in his early formulations of the theory–particularly during his June 12 speech in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in which he declared himself a candidate for president and spoke of the "purpose of prosperity"–Bush has indicated a distinctly conservative way to bring compassion into politics. For Bush, the aim is not to create a compassionate government but for government to maintain the conditions under which individuals and communities can care for themselves and for others. This requires that government be used sparingly, though energetically, to promote the idea of personal responsibility; to nourish the continued involvement of nongovernmental associations, religious organizations, and secular charities in bringing relief to drug addicts, prisoners, and unwed mothers and their children; and to support high standards in quality education made available to all children.

Indeed, as Bush has explained it, compassionate conservatism appears to be an attempt to reconcile the conflicting impulses rooted in the nature of any liberal democracy. After all, our politics depend upon a complex mix of self- interest, or what we want for ourselves; justice, by which we usually mean what is owed others according to the law; and the presently disputed compassion, which can be defined as sympathy for those who suffer accompanied by the desire to help alleviate their condition.

In a free, sprawling, pluralist democracy like ours, self-interest will always be the primary political motivation of the majority of citizens. In such a democracy, justice can be effective in no small measure because citizens can reasonably come to believe that it is in their interest to uphold a system in which each person is treated as equal before the law. And compassion, though generally less powerful than self-interest and often less dignified than justice, though easily distracted and easily corrupted, lives as a vital sentiment within the hearts of many citizens, who refuse to allow their relations to others to be defined exclusively by the imperatives of self-interest and the formal principles enshrined in law.

The problem is that self-interest, justice, and compassion have an awkward habit of pointing in divergent directions and confusing us with conflicting demands. The challenge of democratic self-government today–a perennial challenge for democracies based on the freedom and equality of all–is to craft an account of government and citizenship that, to the extent possible, gives self-interest, justice, and compassion each its due. The party that understands this with greatest clarity and conveys it to voters in the most compelling manner will enjoy a huge advantage come November 2000.

In his 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton spoke frequently of the importance of personal responsibility, family, and community, and he directed his appeal to those who "work hard and play by the rules." In doing so, he was lifting a page from Ronald Reagan's playbook. Republicans cried foul, but Clinton was certainly playing not only skillfully but also fairly. He found a way to talk in a Democratic register about concerns that were not appropriately the exclusive monopoly of the right but the common property of all thoughtful citizens.

Now Bush seems to have learned something from Democrats and the left. Instead of smugly forecasting his inevitable demise, Democrats might do well to contemplate more carefully the causes of his early success.