

Sabotaging the Poor, Selling Out for Politics

If there were a Museum of Terrible Ideas, the permanent collection would surely include today's elected leaders who believe the best way to represent impoverished neighborhoods is to demand the defunding of police departments and supporting policies to undermine public schools.

How can anyone argue that poor people benefit from lax law enforcement or ending cash bail? Not only is there an increased risk of personal harm, even death, but crime-ridden neighborhoods have fewer businesses resulting in higher prices, less consumer choice, and fewer local jobs. And forget about amenities such as safe local parks. Similarly, destroying schools by weakening classroom discipline, hiring teachers on the basis of race and demanding [social promotion](#) is guaranteed to undermine the greatest escalator of economic advancement. With their leaders advocating these crackpot policies, [none of which are popular among ordinary folk](#), poor people hardly need enemies.

Why the foolishness? Let me suggest that securing political power, not uplifting the poor, drives these demands. To be blunt, this advocacy amounts to selling out one's own people to achieve personal power, all covered up with the rhetoric of "achieving racial justice."

People living in crime-ridden neighborhoods with failing schools can be a great political asset. Indeed, being elected from such a constituency typically launches a long and lucrative career as a "public servant," albeit at the expense of one's supporters. Think Maxine Waters (D-CA) and Jim Clyburn (D-SC), who have spent decades in Congress thanks to loyal constituents who have gone nowhere economically.

Central to this dysfunctional relationship is that American officials are elected from a specific locality. Historically, this meant ethnic enclaves or racial groups electing “one of their own.” But, with eventual upward mobility, an official’s base slowly shrinks, and the newcomers, following tradition, vote for “one of their own” but this “own” differs from the locality’s old “own.” So when Jews departed New York City for the suburbs, Jewish elected officials were replaced by recently arrived Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. These may, in turn, eventually be followed by more recent arrivals. Economic mobility results in a new electorate.

But when holding power is the paramount concern, such progression must be sabotaged, and it does not take much to ensure one’s supporters remain in place to elect you year after year, decade after decade. Yes, your district may be a hellish slum, but the upside is that you do not have to fear newcomers of different backgrounds who might vote you out of office. Rampant street crime easily deters middle class gentrifiers—who might prefer your reform-minded rivals—from moving in. Insisting that shoplifting should not be prosecuted means that few businesses will locate in one’s district and this, too, helps deter outsiders from moving in.

Most of all, ensuring one’s constituents cannot get a decent education condemns them to stay put, and the accompanying lack of physical mobility results in a permanent voting bloc. Upbeat stories of smart kids escaping the slums are hardly good news for public officials who prioritize perpetual re-election. Violent schools also serve as a “Do Not Enter” mechanism. Slum fixer-upper housing may be dirt cheap for a middle-class family, but the awful local school means private school for junior, so cheap housing is hardly a bargain.

Keeping neighborhoods impoverished also promotes greater dependency on government largess, a boon for those who prioritize wielding political power. Today’s governments shower the poorest areas with countless programs which are

great opportunities for elected local officials to reward supporters ("[earmarks](#)" when passed by Congress). Further added benefits include grants to community organizations or the steering of private funds to local worthies. Rest assured, elected officials enjoy considerable say in political appointments to boards, commissions, and other sources of income and prestige. By contrast, officials representing well-educated, affluent constituencies are unlikely to see patronage jobs in some anti-poverty program as the ticket to future re-election.

This is the conflict between a secure political career and uplifting the poor in one's election district. Maxine Waters hardly wants her loyal voters to enter the middle class and escape the ghetto, and so she easily tolerates horrific schools overseen by incompetent administrators. Yes this is terrible, but such failures assure Maxine's job security. Ill-educated school graduates cannot go anywhere else and inept teachers and principals need not worry about their own job security as long as they vote correctly.

The problem is thus one of providing incentives linking political success to the achievement of one's voters. Sad to say, removing those who profit from the misery of their voters may be impossible. Politics is not a business where failed executives are fired. Maxine Waters is not about to lose her job over her refusal to help her constituents. No wonder Donald Trump was loathed by the likes of Ms. Waters. He was guilty of trying to organize a jail break.

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