

Bipartisan Reform

Mass incarceration reform has become a bipartisan issue. Nowhere is this more evident than the formation of the Coalition for Public Safety, a multimillion-dollar campaign backed by the conservative Koch Industries and Americans for Tax Reform and the liberal Center for American Progress and ACLU.⁴⁶ The left tends to see the issue as one of social justice and equal protection under the law; the right focuses on driving back big government and cutting costs.

These alliances have generated some controversy among progressives. Some argue that the goal of mass incarceration reform is so important that they will work with whatever partners are available. Others urge caution about the underlying goals of conservative groups and how these goals might influence the outcome of such partnership.

One concern about a focus on budgets is that, as the economic crunch recedes and state budgets expand again, the financial argument will falter. Even before complete economic recovery, some states (such as Arizona⁴⁷) prefer to spend money on more prisons even while slashing budgets in other areas like education.

Another possible concern raises the possibility that seemingly neutral reforms actually benefit private contractors. For instance, one organizer contends, “Right on Crime reforms are driven by a desire to have more people on supervision, paying for their own technological monitoring, reentry services, and probation and parole fees.”⁴⁸ (See p. 35 for more on this shift

towards “offender-funded justice,” exemplified most recently by the DOJ report on Ferguson, MO.) Moving people out of jails and onto the debt-collection rolls of private companies reduces government burden but doesn’t improve the situation of those trapped in the system.

Policies that require drug testing in conjunction with increased opportunities for returning citizens to work may similarly benefit private companies,

to whom workers must pay for the drug test (at a cost of approximately \$42 per test).⁴⁹

T’ruah does not take a position for or against such collaborations. We caution against making broad generalizations either in favor of or against such collaborations, which take many forms nationally and locally. We present the debate to help frame dynamics that may arise within the context of such a partnership.

SHOULD PROGRESSIVE GROUPS PARTNER WITH CONSERVATIVES ON MASS INCARCERATION REFORM?

Neera Tanden, president of the Center for American Progress: “We have in the past and will in the future have criticism of the policy agenda of the Koch brother companies, but where we can find common ground on issues, we will go forward.”⁵⁰

Marie Gottschalk, professor and author of *Caught*: “Hitching the movement against mass incarceration to the purported fiscal burden of the carceral state helps reinforce the premise that eliminating government deficits and government debt should be the top national priority.”⁵¹

46 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/19/us/politics/unlikely-cause-unites-the-left-and-the-right-justice-reform.html?smid=tw-share&_r=0

47 <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/02/arizonas-new-governor-just-cut-education-funding-build-big-new-private-prison>

48 <http://qz.com/355849/prison-reform-is-making-life-inside-prison-worse-not-better/>

49 <https://www.aclu.org/drug-testing-public-assistance-recipients-condition-eligibility>

50 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/19/us/politics/unlikely-cause-unites-the-left-and-the-right-justice-reform.html?smid=tw-share&_r=0

51 Gottschalk, p. 21