

Nygaard Notes

Independent Periodic News and Analysis

Number 647

October 17, 2019

A Just Society

On September 25th Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) announced a major new anti-poverty initiative called “A Just Society.” Since it had nothing to do with impeachment, it was mostly ignored. Some people noticed; the right-wing website RealClearPolitics called it “a socialist nightmare.” So it can’t be all bad! I’ll offer a brief summary here, and you can judge the nightmare for yourself.

Unlike the Green New Deal, which is a vision document and includes no actual legislation, A Just Society is composed of a “suite” of five legislative bills and one resolution, each one intended to “improve our nation’s anti-poverty interventions” in specific ways.

#1. The Recognizing Poverty Act

The first bill, the *Recognizing Poverty Act*, addresses the sad reality that we don’t even have a good way to measure poverty. The National Center for Children in Poverty spells out the problem:

“The current federal poverty level is \$23,550 a year for a family of four and \$19,530 for a family of three. But this measure is based on a methodology developed in the 1960s and now widely recognized as outdated. One major criticism is that the official poverty level is too low. Current research suggests that, on average, families need an income of about twice the federal poverty level just to afford basic expenses. Moreover, although the cost of living varies significantly within and across states, the federal poverty level is the same across the continental U.S. There are also flaws in the methodology used to determine how many families are considered poor by this standard. Official poverty rates are calculated by comparing pre-tax cash income to the poverty level. This means that important work supports, such as the federal Earned Income Tax Credit and SNAP/food stamps, are not included – nor are families’ tax liabilities.”

The *Recognizing Poverty Act* specifically directs the responsible bureaucracies “to assess the adequacy of the poverty line as a measure of the resources families need to afford basic goods and services.” The new poverty line “shall be an amount equal to the income that would be sufficient to make ends meet, accounting for expenditures on food, clothing, shelter, utilities, ‘new necessities’ such as internet, and other needs...”

The new guideline will be adjusted for family size, and will account for different costs of living in different areas and between urban and rural areas. It will be updated annually to account for changing conditions and, when needed, will be “Increased for needs related to health insurance for family members, work expenses for the family, and child care needs for each child under the age of 13 in the family, including identification and consideration of ‘new necessities’ such as Internet access and funds needed to secure children’s equal educational opportunity.”

#2. A Place to Prosper Act

The second bill in the *Just Society* initiative is called the *A Place to Prosper Act of 2019*, and it’s all about stabilizing the housing market, especially for renters. Timely, this, as the Pew Research Center reported a couple of years ago that “more U.S. households are headed by renters than at any point since at least 1965.” That’s partly due to “the lingering effects of the housing crisis.”

The progressive group *Data for Progress* (DfP) calls A Place to Prosper Act “a bold plan to restructure the U.S. housing system” that “would take our country closer to manifesting housing as a human right” and would “protect tenants, regulate landlords, abolish exclusionary zoning, and build more homes outside the private market.” And it comes from the grassroots. DfP tells us

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Greetings,

It's easy to forget, but there are things going on in the world of politics besides impeachment. This issue of Nygaard Notes discusses a couple of them.

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that the bill “is the product of collaboration with the Center for Popular Democracy and their housing justice network” and “builds off three cornerstones,” which are:

- A nationwide cap on rent increases and ban on no-cause evictions (small landlords who rent 5 or fewer homes are exempted), along with new funding for legal counsel for evicted tenants
- Strict regulations on landlords, banning them from refusing to rent to tenants because they receive public assistance (one way that landlords currently often legally discriminate) and requiring transparency for large landlords who rent 100 or more homes on rent prices, evictions, fees charged, lease agreements, ownership, and instances of violations they have committed
- Withholding federal highway funds from localities using exclusionary zoning to prevent housing affordability and integration, while offering additional funds to localities that encourage the development of affordable housing.

#3. The Mercy in Re-Entry Act

The Ocasio-Cortez website explains the rationale for The Mercy in Re-Entry Act: “People formerly involved in the criminal justice system face discrimination, often inhibiting their ability to support themselves, their families and their communities. Instead of investing in mass incarceration, we need to invest in the most vulnerable members of our society. This bill ensures that all persons in need are eligible for the social safety net, regardless of prior involvement with the criminal justice system.” The bill itself is very clear that “an individual may not be denied any Federal public benefit *solely on the basis* that the individual was convicted of a criminal offense.” [emphasis by Nygaard] Benefits thus protected include “retirement, welfare, health, disability, public or assisted housing, postsecondary education, food assistance, unemployment benefit, or any other similar benefit...”

#4. The Embrace Act

“This bill would ensure that all persons in need are eligible for the largest programs of the social safety net, regardless of their immigration status.” Again from the AOC website.

Similar to the above bill (both bills are basically one page long) the Embrace Act plainly states that “an individual who is an alien (without regard to the immigration status of that alien) may not be denied any Federal public benefit *solely on the basis* of the individual’s immigration status.” The list of protected benefits is the same as the list above.

#5. The Uplift Our Workers Act

This bill would require that the federal government “evaluate – and give systemized preference to – ‘worker-friendly’ contractors as it makes contracting decisions.” That is, the federal government would assign a “score” to contractors aimed at steering federal dollars/work toward businesses that comply with existing labor law; employ full-time rather than part-time workers; offer stable and predictable schedules to their workers; guarantee access to paid sick leave; offer paid parental and family leave; have a union workforce; provide health care benefits to their workers; and so forth.

#6: Guarantee Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights for All

The one proposal in the *Just Society* initiative that is not actual legislation is a resolution expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that “the United States must ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights,” or ICESCR.

According to the Center for Economic and Social Rights, “Economic, social, and cultural rights include the human right to work, the right to an adequate standard of living, including food, clothing, and housing, the right to physical and mental health, the right to social security, the right to a healthy environment, ↗↗

→→ and the right to education.”

Imagine the United States going on record in support of rights like these!

Being a treaty, the ICESCR would be legally binding on the U.S. if it were to be ratified. Given the U.S. record on honoring treaties, it's unlikely that ratification would bring about much actual change, at least in the short run. Still, it would add a moral weight to arguments that are needed, and will be needed, in the ongoing struggles to retain many hard-won rights that are perpetually threatened by the neoliberal juggernaut currently being led by the forces of Trumpism. And were we to have a substantive public debate on the idea of the United States voluntarily entering into a global alliance aimed at protecting human rights... Well, such a debate would be consciousness-raising, to say the least.

The actual treaty is worth reading, and can be found online: www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx

Neither Nightmare nor Dream

I've mentioned that some on the right consider A Just Society to be “a socialist nightmare.” One website calls it “Full-On Insane.” An opinion piece on Fox News this week discussed the plan, leading off with this thoughtful comment: “Socialist Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., has moved from the loony left to ‘The Twilight Zone’ with her latest nutty plan to achieve her impossible dream of turning America into a socialist utopia.”

Upon its release, AOC told the New York Times that “with our Just Society package, we're not simply addressing poverty or wages. We're addressing some of the basic structural reasons that are resulting in those outcomes.” Well, not really. For the record, I agree with Genevieve Leigh who, writing on the World Socialist Website, argues that A Just Society is far too mild a response to the massive problems of poverty and inequality in this country.

Listening to AOC, Leigh argues, “one would expect legislation on a scale never before seen: a massive jobs program; trillions allocated to infrastructure, health care and education; a radical redistribution of money from the military to social programs; strict government control or even public ownership of major industries and banks.”

Such a package would indeed be seen as a socialist nightmare to many people, and as a very inspiring dream to others, like me. But, alas, the initiative called A Just Society is modest, indeed. So, you ask, why highlight it? Several reasons. First of all, I imagine that many people have not heard of it and, modest or not, it is at least *something*. Secondly, given the current political climate, a mild collection of bills like this may be the best we can expect. Thirdly, even to discuss the proposals in A Just Society would enrich the public discourse. Finally, I want people to know just how modest this initiative really is, so the attacks on it using “socialist” as an epithet will be understood for what they are. We'll be hearing this particular epithet used in this particular way many, many times in the next twelve months. Better get used to it. ♦

“Quote” of the Week: They. Us. Our Love. Our Borders.

On September 26th The New York Times ran an article discussing “How Right-Wing Media Talks About Impeachment.” But it wasn't just about impeachment, as this issue's “Quote” of the Week illustrates. After listing a few pro-Trump media personalities, the Times mentioned “conservative” radio host and author Michael Savage, “who has been critical of the president at times,” but who has now “joined in circling the wagons.” A few excerpts:

“*There is a war going on right now, Savage told his audience this week, adding, ‘They haven't given up trying to destroy us.’*”

“*Mr. Savage was one of Mr. Trump's first talk radio boosters during his 2016 campaign. But he had been publicly doubting the president and criticizing him for failing to keep promises like building a wall on the southern border. The issue of impeachment has helped reignite Mr. Savage's passions... ‘It's not about Trump is it?’ he said on his show. ‘It's about us. It's about our love for America. It's about our love for our own borders, language and culture.’*”

In a testament to the power of Othering, the Times never bothered to define who is “us” and who is “them.” To whom do you think these pronouns refer? ♦

Social Security 2100 Update

Seven months ago I wrote about proposed legislation that would expand Social Security. It's called "Social Security 2100". The House bill has 209 co-sponsors, and a recent poll found that "66% of voters are more likely to back candidates who support expanding and increasing Social Security benefits, vs. 18% who are less likely."

As I reported in March, Social Security 2100 would:

- INCREASE SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS FOR ALL OF US.
- BETTER PROTECT AGAINST INFLATION
- PROTECT LOW INCOME WORKERS The sponsors of the SS 2100 Act state that "No one who paid into the system over a lifetime should retire into poverty. The new minimum benefit will be set at 25% above the poverty line and would be tied to wage levels to ensure that the minimum benefit does not fall behind."
- TAX MORE OF THE INCOME OF THE WEALTHY
- ASK EVERYONE TO CHIP IN BY PAYING HIGHER TAXES. Note the findings of the National Academy of Social Insurance, who conducted a poll in 2013 and found that "Fully 82% of Americans agree it is critical to preserve Social Security for future generations even if it means increasing the Social Security taxes paid by working Americans; those agreeing include 90% of African Americans, 84% of Hispanics, and 81% of whites."

I also reported that more than 150 Democratic lawmakers have launched a group known as the Expand Social Security Caucus. About three weeks ago, on September 26th the Caucus sent a letter to House

Speaker Nancy Pelosi saying that "We... strongly urge you to bring H.R. 860, the Social Security 2100 Act, to the floor of the House of Representatives for a vote before Thanksgiving recess."

Said the letter, "There is no better way for us to demonstrate our support for seniors, people with disabilities, and young people than by prioritizing this legislation for a vote on the House floor."

Particularly notable was the paragraph on the higher taxes: "We understand that there are some concerns about the financing of this legislation. To be clear, under this proposal, the [SS tax] increase amounts to only an additional five cents on every hundred dollars earned in 2020. In a quarter of a century, the increase is still only an additional \$1.20 on every hundred dollars – or put another way, a little over one penny on every dollar of earnings. In addition to the [SS tax] increase, those earning over \$400,000 will have to contribute to Social Security at the same rate as minimum wage workers and, indeed, 94 percent of all workers do."

The letter was sent to the Speaker on September 26th, two days after she announced the beginning of formal impeachment proceedings. In case you were wondering why you never heard about it.

Meanwhile, Forbes Magazine reports that "Donald Trump won't say it, but Republicans in the Senate will: Social Security and Medicare would be on the chopping block in a second Trump term. Pointing to rising deficits, Republican senators have all but promised to gut entitlements if Trump gets four more years." ♦

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