

## **Compassionate Conservatism is the new 'big idea'**

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*Above: George W Bush pictured at a 'Habitat for Humanity' project*

**George W Bush has shown, though his governorship in Texas, that he has a genuine commitment to rebuilding damaged and disadvantaged communities. He is offering a new Conservative response to fighting poverty.**

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If Governor George W Bush wins November's Presidential election historians may identify his keynote speech to the Republican Convention in Philadelphia as a pivotal moment in modern politics. Those who do not understand Bush's compassionate conservatism agenda are prone to dismiss the concept as an empty exercise in electoral calculation. Commentators inside the so-called Washington beltway believe that compassion can only be measured in terms of dollars and cents. It follows that the most caring political party is the one that spends the most.

This materialistic bias is being rejected by those closest to the poor and marginalised. The respected leader of Prison Fellowship ministries, Charles Colson, recently wrote: "Many American politicians [sincerely believed] that all it would take to solve the problems of poverty and crime would be some well-designed, well-funded government programmes... The welfare state has backfired, creating both a near permanent underclass of dependency and a host of attendant social pathologies, from broken families and teen pregnancy to drug abuse and crime."

Despite America's great prosperity and huge welfare expenditures these social problems are growing. Bush believes that an alternative must be found not just to failed government programmes but also to the indifference that sometimes seems to have characterised his party.

From a balcony opposite the main podium I watched Bush deliver his acceptance speech. Veiled attacks on the Clinton years, promises of tax cuts and opposition to partial-birth abortion were rapturously received by the partisan crowd of 20,000.

### **Social policy**

But I believe that Bush's account of a visit he made to a juvenile detention centre in Texas was the most significant part of his speech. Young men who "had committed grownup crimes" talked to him about their experiences. Bush said: "Toward the end of the conversation, one young man, about 15, raised his hand and asked a haunting question: 'What do you think of me?' He seemed to be asking, like many Americans who struggle - 'Is there hope for me? Do I have a chance?' And frankly 'Do you, a white man in a suit, really care what happens to me?' A small voice, but it speaks for so many... children without fathers in neighbourhoods where gangs seem like friendship, where drugs promise peace, and where sex, sadly, seems like the closest thing to belonging."

Then Bush echoed Ronald Reagan's famous remark of the 1980s when he stood beside the Berlin Wall. Bush: "When these problems aren't confronted, it builds a wall within our nation. On one side are wealth and technology, education and ambition. On the other side of the wall are poverty and prison, addiction and despair... We must tear down that wall".

It would be easy to dismiss this as opportunistic rhetoric if it was not for Bush's record in Texas. He has fashioned a more inclusive state by programmes of child literacy, abstinence education, tax cuts for poorest citizens, outreach to immigrant Hispanics and empowerment of community and faith-based charities. He has enlisted leading Christian charities like Teen

Challenge (against addiction), Prison Fellowship, the Salvation Army and the YMCA.

A powerful demonstration of the breadth of Bush's appeal came on the Monday night of the convention when a black churchleader, Herb Lusk, delivered a live message of endorsement from his downtown Philadelphia church via the huge video screens on the convention floor. Pastor Lusk talked about how their previously debt-ridden church had been transformed over recent years. It had done so by reaching out to the hungry, homeless and hopeless of its community. This outreach had made it relevant to the community and huge growth in membership had resulted. To sustained applause from the overwhelmingly white Republican audience Lusk told how his church had bought the bank next door that a few years earlier had refused it a loan. Lusk applauded Bush for his recognition of the contribution that faith can make to solving social problems. Because faith understands the holistic needs of a disadvantaged person or community it was succeeding where the state was failing.

### **Moving the right onto new ground**

Bush has faced the cheap accusation that he is not interested in social renewal - only in saving money. In an attempt at reassurance he has said that he will initially maintain expenditure if his mistrustful opponents will allow him to explore alternative means to state schemes. By neutralising this fundamental objection to the liberation of community and faith-based organisations he has moved his tanks squarely on to the Left's lawn.

For too long the American electorate has had to choose between a Republican Party that had the right policies on the sanctity of life, family values and personal responsibility and a Democratic Party that made reassuring noises about social justice. Bush is repudiating that false choice and his compassionate conservatism philosophy is balancing personal morality with innovative policy ideas on education and urban renewal. If he succeeds the implications for politics across the world will be fundamental.