

Two reports expose social conditions in Oregon

Noah Page**27 January 2005**

As the Oregon Legislature convenes this month for its 73rd biennial assembly, two reports issued recently on social conditions in this state of 3.5 million represent an indictment of a political establishment that is clearly incapable of and unwilling to address the needs of poor and working-class citizens.

Earlier this month, a survey conducted every two years by the Oregon Progress Board and 16 other state agencies found that an estimated 609,000 citizens—one in six—don't have any health insurance. Seventeen percent of Oregonians are uninsured, which represents a 3 percent increase from only two years ago and is the highest since 1992.

The reason is obvious. The state's sputtering economy—which has distinguished Oregon in recent years with such honors as having one of the worst unemployment rates and levels of hunger—has cut deeply into tax revenues. Lawmakers have responded by making cuts in public services, such as the Oregon Health Plan, the state-funded insurance program for the poor.

In 2001, more than 100,000 low-income Oregonians were enrolled in the plan—which is, it should be noted, an indictment itself of a society that has lost its way. Today, that figure is down to 39,000 adults who aren't covered by Medicaid.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski, a first-term Democrat who has been openly praised by the most conservative lawmakers for his capitulation to their agenda, has responded with a budget that would make Karl Rove grin at the sheer audacity. He intends to limit coverage to 25,000 adults—a figure equal to roughly 18 percent of the population of Salem, the state capital. This, from a man who sleeps in a mansion and insists that when he goes to sleep at night, he sees the faces of “working people”!

The scenario brings to mind the remark made some years ago by the right-wing strategist Grover Norquist, who has expressed his desire to see entire state budgets go

bankrupt. “I don't want to abolish government,” he told a journalist in May 2001. “I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.”

Norquist would do well to visit Oregon, where Bush's vision for America is being quickly realized, with not a little help from Democratic lawmakers. Insofar as the Oregon Health Plan is concerned, the time is fast approaching when Norquist and Bush may celebrate by unfurling a taxpayer-funded “mission accomplished” banner.

Meanwhile, a report issued by a non-profit advocacy group reveals a disgraceful state of affairs for Oregon's most vulnerable residents—children.

Oregon's news media coverage has generally focused on one of the report's damning indicators of social malaise: skyrocketing child abuse reports, which have increased 61 percent since 1994.

According to the “Status of Oregon's Children County Data Book 2004,” published by the nonprofit group Children First for Oregon, the state received 42,455 complaints of possible child abuse and neglect. Of those, little more than 20,500 were investigated, and about half of those, 9,447, turned out to be “substantiated cases of abuse or neglect.”

The focus is predictable. In December, two cases of serious neglect of children in the care of foster parents came to light. In the first, paramedics responding to a 9-1-1 call found a five-year-old girl weighing only 28 pounds. The foster parents have been charged with felony mistreatment. Little more than a week later, a 15-month-old boy died after suffering severe head injuries while in state care. A criminal investigation is ongoing.

It is in this context that the media have seized the abuse and neglect statistics reported by Children First for Oregon to illustrate that the Oregon Department of Human Services, the public agency charged with

investigating child abuse, is a “beleaguered” agency deserving closer scrutiny. Of course, few would argue with that proposition.

However, as alarming as the child abuse figures are, it is worth noting that they represent but a fraction of the data reported by Children First for Oregon. The document, taken as a whole, reveals a picture of pervasive social and economic malaise that cannot be grasped by simply pointing to this or that poorly funded state agency.

Among its findings:

* Of the state’s 875,000 children, 342,042, or 37 percent, are considered low-income.

* In a typical month, some 32,225 children come from families that rely on cash assistance from TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). Nearly 175,000 rely on food stamps. About 205,000 children require assistance from the Oregon Health Plan.

* In a typical month, 103,153 households with children rely on assistance from the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition program.

* Eleven percent of children in the eighth grade report that they or family members skip meals or eat less at meals because they do not have enough money for food.

* Forty-one percent of children attending public schools are eligible to receive free or reduced price lunches during the school year. On average, the report found, 145,335 children eat free or reduced price meals during the school year. The need is so great that some districts offer limited assistance during the summer months but fall far short: only 28,039 children enjoy such meals during June, July and August.

These alarming figures come four months after another Children First report gave the state a D+ on its annual report card of health and well-being. That’s the lowest mark in 12 years, and one that the report’s authors attribute to a high rate of uninsured children, high unemployment among adults and not enough affordable housing or child-care resources for poor families.

“At the present,” the report states in its executive summary, “the double bind of state revenue shortfalls and a lackluster economy threatens the well-being of thousands of children, jeopardizing their future and Oregon’s.”

Gov. Kulongoski has responded as he typically does to dire news of any kind: all these issues are “priorities” for him, but given current “budget realities,” there isn’t anything he can or will do about it. A spokeswoman for Kulongoski quoted in the *Oregonian* offered the bleak promise that it is “impossible to hold any program

harmless.”

The response of Oregon’s media commentators, meanwhile, has revealed their paralysis or impotence. The *Oregonian*’s liberal pundits, associate editor David Sarasohn and columnist Steve Duin, have generally laid the blame on Kulongoski himself and the lack of “leadership.”

Noting that his “disenchantment” with Kulongoski has been “well-documented,” Duin took another shot at the governor on December 19 after examining what he termed Kulongoski’s “Orwellian” budget message: “Two years closer to re-election, Ted has struck a different tone in this budget,” he wrote. “In a disappointing surrender to conservatives, some of whom despise public schools, Kulongoski is pretending there’s gubernatorial nobility in underfunding public education.”

Duin concludes: “He speaks of leading us somewhere, then disappears, leaving the heavy lifting for the foundation boards, the local-option committees and the parents who used to think the problem—and the governor—couldn’t get any worse.”

Sarasohn offers little more. Reporting on Kulongoski’s “state of the state” speech on the opening day of the legislature in Salem, the political columnist remarked on the obvious disconnect between the governor’s rhetoric and reality:

“In the first five minutes of Gov. Ted Kulongoski’s State of the State speech Monday, children—like hyperactive 4-year-olds—popped up five times,” Sarasohn wrote in his January 12 column. “Then, for the rest of the speech, they vanished.”

These pundits limit themselves to an ultimately useless survey of the surface of things. The question is not a lack of “leadership” but the objective crisis of capitalism and its dire consequences for the population. Disenchanted, the liberal commentators merely lob some shells at a demonstrably inept and increasingly right-wing governor.

The rest of the time, they vanish.



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