

No Serious Discussion About Entitlement Reform In The U.S.

WASHINGTON – Much has been said about the first Trump budget recently released. The expected partisan critiques –in fact outcry– focus on proposed cuts in Medicaid and disability benefits. Therefore, this becomes a “cruel budget”, an open attack against weak, low income Americans, and so forth.

No discussion about Entitlement Reform

Well, this may be true. However, the biggest problem with this proposed federal budget, (and with many budgets that preceded it, coming from both Democratic and Republican Presidents), is that –leaving aside symbolic fights– it is a reflection of an unchanged (unchangeable?) fiscal *status quo* that will stay pretty much the same until the American political leadership –Democrats and Republicans acting together– will finally address its ***Number One Policy Priority: Entitlement Reform.***

Symbolic cuts

The Trump Budget, even assuming that it will be passed by Congress as is, (it will not), will never “solve” the structural fiscal imbalance –namely: permanent high deficits– that has regrettably become the norm in America. You may indeed cut spending for the State Department, the Education and Energy Departments, and more. You may reduce Medicaid and the Food Stamps Programs. But none of this would really “bend” the overall spending curve. Hence the deficits and a growing national debt, soon to be out of control.

How so? Very simple. Anybody who has given even a mildly serious look at U.S. Federal Budgets notices a trend. The main drivers of (over) spending are large and growing federal

entitlement programs that are not even voted on. They are on automatic pilot.

Social Security and Medicare bigger than ever

The fact is that these programs (first and foremost Social Security and Medicare, accompanied by many other smaller federal assistance program), have become so large that now they comprise almost 2/3 of total federal spending. If you add to this colossal total another 16% of overall federal spending devoted to national defense (sounds like a lot; but in relation to GDP defense spending is historically quite low), plus about 6% of total outlays that have to be set aside for debt service, (this is about paying interest on all the debt we have accumulated until now), and you realize that there is almost nothing left to squabble about.

Indeed, “the rest” –what the budget professionals call “non defense discretionary spending”– is less than 15% of the total. Since the bulk of all spending (with the exception of defense) is essentially off-limits, all the budget battles are fought on this residual 15%.

Which is to say that, unless we want to entirely abolish most of the U.S. Government, (Agriculture, Justice, Transportation, money for NIH and medical research, NASA, and more), we cannot possibly change the present pattern of spending without seriously looking at entitlement reform, with the goal of reducing future outlays. Since most of the real money goes to these programs, they should be reformed so that there will still be benefits for seniors in the future, but sustainable benefits. Simply stated, for social programs to work in a sustainable way, in the future most Americans will get less.

Everybody knows this

Again, every student of US public policy, beginning with House Speaker Paul Ryan, (He used to be Chairman of both the Budget and later on the Ways and Means Committees), knows all this.

And yet, for fear of causing massive social unrest, nobody –Republicans and Democrats– want to go even near the entitlement reform issue. The topic is worse than a non starter. It is almost unanimously viewed as political suicide.

Not straying from the conventional wisdom, as a candidate, Donald Trump promised that he would leave all key federal entitlements untouched, claiming that these benefits have been earned by individual Americans, and therefore they should not be messed with. A very conventional approach.

“The Moment of Truth”

A few years back, (2010), President Barack Obama convened a special bipartisan commission (it became known as the “Debt Commission”) that was chaired by Erskine Bowles (Democrat) and Alan Simpson (Republican) in order to give a serious look at the issues of taxation and spending.

These two elder statesmen took the lead and eventually issued a powerful report in December 2010 aptly titled *“The Moment of Truth”*. They, and most of the members of their Debt Commission, argued convincingly about the need to seek and find broad bipartisan support for a thoughtful plan aimed at reforming entitlement programs that had been designed in another era with different demographics (starting with life expectancy, much shorter at that time), and much lower health care costs. They pointed out that, if we change nothing, we are headed towards financial ruin.

They argued intelligently and convincingly. But nothing, absolutely nothing happened.

No action

As it turned out, President Obama (even though he created the Commission) did not want to tinker with issues viewed by most political insiders as “radioactive”.

The Tea Party Movement, at that time growing in national popularity, was led by amateurs who understood practically nothing about the real dynamics of public spending. Their home spun wisdom was that America's run away public spending and ensuing annual deficits, were all due to "fraud, waste and abuse". As simple as that. Their remedy? Eliminate silly programs and politically motivated earmarks, tighten the system, punish a few offenders who get benefits via false claims, and all would be fine.

Well, it would not be.

Given the overwhelming and growing weight of federal entitlements benefiting mostly senior Americans, you could abolish the entire Defense Department and you would still not be able to alter the overall pattern characterized by over spending and perennial budget deficits.

Spending favors senior citizens

Simply stated, in America, just like in most other rich democratic countries, there is now an unwritten social contract whereby large and increasing amounts of national resources are devoted to assistance to the sick and to the elderly.

The problem is not that the priorities are wrong. The problem is that this level of assistance has become unaffordable, because it is no longer matched by revenue. Hence our annual deficits that add to the already exploded national debt. Of course, we could raise taxes in order to rebalance the federal deficit. But this would mean significantly "higher taxes", another radioactive issue that no mainstream politician wants to address.

More debt is the path of least resistance

So, here is the thing. Politicians want to keep doling out large entitlement benefits. But they do not want to tell the

country that there is not enough money to pay for them. Instead, they have chosen the path of least resistance: use most of the federal revenue to pay for the entitlements, this way starving the rest, and borrow the balance.

This may look clever in the short run. But this approach means that we are well on our way to becoming Europe or Japan: societies with enormous public spending and huge national debts that simply do not have any resources to invest in their own future.

Let me say this clearly: these are societies headed towards decline. In fact, some of them are already beyond repair, mostly due to the impossible fiscal burdens represented by gigantic national debts.

Where are we headed?

Well, unless we want to become the next Italy or Japan, we need a serious conversation about the level of future federal benefits. This does mean *“throwing sick grandma in the snow, in the middle of winter”*. But it surely means readjusting benefits so that, going forward, we take care of the neediest first, while all the others will get smaller benefits, and later in life.

Anyway, all this is purely theoretical. The current budget debate, with all its theater of partisan acrimony, posturing and grand standing, does not even begin to address entitlement reform. And this means that what we are having is not a serious, adult debate. This is mostly rubbish.

We need a serious debate

The American people deserve national leaders –in both parties– who will tell them the truth about what we can afford going forward, and how we can and must share sacrifice, (fewer benefits, higher taxes, at least for some), in a fair and equitable manner.

This is what mature political discourse in a republic should be about. But nobody wants to even think about it.