

Barbara Lee's War on Poverty

Recently, Congresswoman Barbara Lee said to me, "This is a moment when people are suffering. They are one paycheck -- if they have a paycheck -- away from poverty."

That's why Lee has maintained a laser-like focus on addressing poverty. One in eight Americans -- approximately 37 million people -- now live below the federal poverty line of \$19,971 for a family of four. (A woefully inadequate measure that is 42 years old and fails to account for basic necessities.) That's 4.9 million more people than in 2000 and the poverty rate for children is the highest of all age groups. Nearly 60 million people live just above the poverty line. Using the British standard of measurement, approximately 30 percent of Americans -- and 40 percent of American children -- are living in poverty.

In January, Lee introduced House Concurrent Resolution 198 to get her colleagues on record saying that the US should set a national goal of cutting poverty in half over the next 10 years. The resolution stated that "policy initiatives addressing poverty have not kept pace with the needs of millions of Americans" and that "the United States has a moral responsibility to meet the needs of those persons, groups, and communities that are impoverished, disadvantaged or otherwise in poverty."

"That resolution passed on a bipartisan basis," Lee told me. "No opposition. And so we're looking now at the specific recommendations of many groups that have come together to talk about what makes sense to begin to reduce and eliminate poverty. And so, that's the mission of the Out of Poverty Caucus which I co-chair. And it's moving. The Speaker has taken note, the Leadership has taken note."

Lee said that a real test of Democratic priorities occurred in the budget debate earlier this month. The Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC), which she co-chairs along with Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey, introduced its Progressive Caucus Budget which included an Anti-Poverty and Opportunity Initiative. The CPC budget spent \$468.3 billion on defense, \$68.7 billion less than President Bush's request of World War II-proportions.

It called for \$73 billion in FY 2009, increasing to \$129 billion in FY 2018, to fund a comprehensive strategy to cut poverty in half in a decade, including: expanding child care and increasing Head Start funding; making the Child Tax Credit fully refundable and

expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit for larger families; increasing funding for Food Stamps programs; increasing housing vouchers by 200,000 annually; lifting restrictions on TANF, Food Stamps, SSI and Medicaid for documented immigrant families; fully funding block grants to states with broad anti-poverty strategies and distributing targeted grants to states for families where a parent or child has a disability; increasing funding for Indian Health Services, education, housing and infrastructure, natural resources management, and other areas impacting Native American poverty; and reversing the 20 percent cut in child support enforcement.

The CPC budget also offered a second economic stimulus package -- to pump \$118.9 billion into the economy -- with funding increases for unemployment insurance, food stamps, foreclosure relief and housing assistance, and Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) payments to states; and also job creation through repair of schools, transportation infrastructure and public housing, and building new wastewater treatment plants. Over the next decade its sustained Rebuild and Reinvest in America Initiative would create green jobs and overhaul our nation's crumbling infrastructure.

In the end, the budget was defeated by a 98-322 vote. But it received 17 more votes than last year, and the Democratic vote was 98-131 (during an election year when too many Democrats still fear criticism from Republicans on domestic spending). Clearly, the progressive movement in Congress is growing. Lee and her CPC colleagues will introduce the Anti-Poverty and Opportunity Initiative and also the Rebuild and Reinvest in America Initiative as their own freestanding bills in coming months. She also continues to work on a second economic stimulus package.

"I'm cautiously optimistic," Lee said. "We heard while negotiating the first stimulus that there would be a second -- and that the reasons why we couldn't get the food stamps, and unemployment insurance, and those efforts -- in the first stimulus, it just wouldn't pass and we needed to get money in the hands of people right away. But that we'd come back and work on the second piece, and so that's what we're working on."

Lee is disappointed that Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton aren't addressing poverty more aggressively in their respective presidential campaigns.

"Every now and then they'll say a little bit but for the most part I don't think any of them have made this a bold initiative like Senator Edwards did," she said. "Of course, I'm an Obama person. Every chance I get I'm pushing [his campaign] to talk about poverty in a direct way. And I assume the Clinton people are talking to their candidate about this.... We've always talked about the middle-class -- which is fine, we want to make sure the middle-class stays [strong]. But we never seem to fix our mouths to talk about the poor and

low-income individuals. And, of course, when you talk about poor people there may be some negative connotations about that. You know, maybe there's a messaging issue. But when people are poor, they're poor. When they don't have any money, they don't have any money."

As for Lee, she will continue to strengthen the anti-poverty coalition and fight for strategies that work. Within the halls of Congress, she's part of the Faith Working Group -- united in its view that the budget is a moral document and that there is a moral imperative to fight poverty. She works closely with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Center for American Progress Task Force on Poverty who urged her to push the resolution setting a national goal to cut poverty in half in a decade. She and the CPC have reached out to work with Martin Luther King III's Realizing the Dream initiative. And the Economic Policy Institute and Campaign for America's Future are very involved in the second economic stimulus package. Labor, health care, and affordable housing advocates are also on board in helping to move progressive legislation.

"A major coalition could develop from this effort," Lee said.

With the poor getting poorer, and the middle-class shrinking, Lee's steadfast commitment to fighting poverty -- and building a coalition to win that fight -- is needed now in new and urgent ways.

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