

Yes, debate welfare issues — but fairly

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Governor Carcieri says he wants a public debate on the topic of welfare and what kind of behavior it promotes. I say: Bring it on.

Amid a budget crisis, the Republican has been saying the welfare system is “enabling” unmarried women to “have children they can’t support.” He wants to speed people into jobs and help kids.

Such comments, on a hot-button issue, appeal to some taxpayers and infuriate others. Democratic state Sen. Joshua Miller brands Carcieri a disciple of Karl Rove. Miller says it’s “infuriating” to see a governor engage in a “distraction strategy” over a relatively small part of the budget.

Don’t assume only Republicans talk the way Carcieri talks. In 1994, Democratic Gov. Bruce Sundlun insisted to me that people actually sat around and decided to have another baby in order to get more money from the state.

Carcieri typically talks about single women having children. But, when a caller last week scolded him on John DePetro’s WPRO show for ignoring the role of men, the governor quickly declared that it’s “disgraceful” when they father children and shirk responsibility.

If Carcieri thinks the state can save money via changes in welfare — and can show such changes would help kids — I’d be mighty interested.

And he has a point when he says marriage lends stability to child-rearing and that churches should do more to help folks understand the values at stake in the choices they make. “People’s souls need to be fed as much as their mouths,” he said on WPRO, a comment that brought applause from caller Melvoid Benson, a former Democratic state representative.

But I don’t like the idea that the governor gets to set all the terms of the debate. In regard to the budget, he rules out tax hikes, even on wealthy people.

Even regarding welfare itself, I’m curious to see how open-minded Carcieri is. Kate Brewster, director of Rhode Island College’s Poverty Institute, says she’d love a public discussion. She says welfare parents have been “put in a silo in a system that doesn’t have the resources to give them the skills that they need to succeed in the work force.” She pleads to have Carcieri & Co. convene a task force of social service advocates, state agencies, the business community and providers to address such topics.

At a Rhode Island Community Food Bank event last week, Kathleen Gorman, director of the University of Rhode Island's Feinstein hunger center, decried the "vitriol" directed at people struggling to make ends meet.

Later, she told me she was referring to Carcieri and the talk-show culture. "I think the governor knows, I think most people know, it's not a shameful thing, but we're turning it into a bad thing to be poor. If you don't have enough money, why does that make you a horrible person?"

She said she wept when she read Carcieri's welfare comments in the newspaper. She said, "When you start telling people that they're bad people because of their life's circumstances, you're not helping them."

I said Carcieri would say he wasn't calling them bad people, only that they'd made bad decisions. She said, "Point to me the first person who never made a bad decision in their life. I think he is calling them bad people." She termed him "very mean spirited."

I prefer not to think of Carcieri that way. He certainly doesn't think of himself that way. But if I were he, I'd ask myself: "What am I saying that's coming across wrong? How can I demonstrate I really do care?"

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