



Renewing civil society

The U.S. income gap — the distance between rich and poor — is bigger than it’s been at any time since the Great Depression, a fact seized upon by many on the left as justification for more government, more income redistribution and more paeans to Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty.

In fact, many on the left suggest, it’s time for America to open up another front.

President Obama has himself said that the “combined trends of increased inequality and decreasing mobility pose a fundamental threat

to the American Dream” and are the “defining challenge of our times.”

“Why,” he went on to ask during a speech at the Center for American Progress not long ago, “has Washington consistently failed to act?”

U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan, who stands as good a chance as anyone right now at taking over the Oval Office, has a different question.

Ryan in no way disagrees with the importance of these issues. He’s spent considerable time over the last year visiting inner-city neighborhoods with civil rights



Paul Ryan sees entrenched poverty as a symptom of the American Dream slipping away

*activist Robert L. Woodson Sr. and putting together a strategy for restoring the American Dream. That strategy will be featured in his forthcoming book, *Where Do We Go From Here?* (Grand Central Publishing), scheduled for August release.*

In an interview with WPRI President Mike Nichols, the Wisconsin congressman was careful to parse the two frequently conflated terms: inequality and mobility. And he asked a very different question than the one President Obama does.

“What are we going to do to remove the barriers to allow people to be where they want to be and do with their lives what they want to do?”

While the left can say, “I’ve got a program to fix this problem in our communities. All I’ve got to do is fund it, raise taxes, spend money,” the answer from the right “isn’t so clean,” says Ryan. “Our answer isn’t so quick and easy. It isn’t government’s responsibility. It’s our responsibility in our communities to do this, and we’ve got to get involved.”

personal safety — you don't think to yourself, "Government's going to fix that. I don't have to get involved."

Nichols: What you're trying to do seems incredibly ambitious. You're trying to reverse this ingrained belief that the War on Poverty is a government responsibility rather than a responsibility that we all share.

Ryan: That's right. Not to wear my religion on my sleeve, but in Catholicism we call it subsidiarity. Which is why you have to tackle these problems locally. And, yes, if you cannot do it locally, then you kick it upstairs to the next level, and then to the next level. But you don't start at the top and wash your hands of responsibility.



That is the problem the government's response to poverty, unbeknownst and unintentionally, created.

Right now, the average taxpayer, who's stretching and working really hard, living in a suburb, when they drive by those blighted neighborhoods, they think: "It's not my responsibility. Government will take care of it. I have enough problems of my own. I've got to pay my taxes, pay my bills, save for college for

my kids."

Unfortunately, that just can't cut it anymore. Everybody's got to get involved. It's each of us, not government, each of us. The government needs to remove the barriers that make this harder.

For non-Catholics, I say subsidiarity is related to the principle of federalism.

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'We've seen this 50-year War on Poverty, which put in these perverse incentives that trapped people in poverty.'

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Nichols: I'm Catholic, and I understand that. You seem to speak increasingly, frankly, as a Catholic, and it's compelling.

Ryan: I try not to.

Nichols: But how do you speak to people who don't have a religious view of the world and encourage them to form communities? To step up in ways that are really based on nature rather than government, or on human decency rather than government?

Ryan: I know exactly what you mean. That's why I try to speak in the most ecumenical way I can. The way I describe it is: Look, if we don't fight to create the space for a civil society and work to revitalize civil society, then government's going to do it. That means government will take away more of our freedoms, more of our liberties and more of the fullness of living life. It won't work.

