Americans are in a disagreeable mood. Polls show pessimism about the country’s future at record highs, trust in government at record lows, and a deep distaste for political incumbents of both parties. It is tempting to attribute this discontent to the economy, and surely the jobless rate has much to do with Americans’ disquiet. But more than unemployment troubles America. Voters have been telling pollsters for years, well before the epic economic collapse, that they believe the country is far off track. It is not just that middle- and working-class Americans cannot seem to move ahead or that too many schools are failing. It is not only that we seem persistently unable to face our ruinous budget deficit or reform our ill-designed entitlement system.

Americans increasingly feel there is a profound and widening distance between our most cherished ideals and the reality of our national life. In some fundamental way, Americans believe, the nation is disordered. Barack Obama’s promise to address that disorder — to practice a reformist, even transformative politics — is what got him elected three years ago. Instead, Obama pursued an agenda of government aggrandizement. Americans want that aggrandizement reversed, but they want more. They want to put their country back in order and make society reflect again their deepest moral commitments, to recover a shared sense of belonging and purpose.

We used to have a word to describe the order we long for: justice. The West’s greatest thinkers, no less than its major religious traditions, have insisted again and again on the centrality of justice. “Justice is the end of government,” James Madison wrote in Federalist No. 51. “It is the end of civil society.” Madison was echoing Aristotle, who argued that justice...
is the purpose of political community. Though today we often think of justice only in reference to crime and punishment, Aristotle understood that there is far more to justice than that: He contended that justice means arranging society in the right way, in accord with how humans are made and meant to live. The just society is one that permits its citizens to exercise their noblest gifts, to reach their highest potentials, to flourish. Thus while all partnerships aim at some good, Aristotle taught, the political partnership “aims at the most authoritative good of all,” at justice.

We no longer think of justice in this manner, partly because for the better part of a century the term has been hijacked by the left. In the last hundred years, justice became oddly synonymous with labor unions and planned economies and then the anti-American radicalism of the 1960s. It is now too often taken to describe egalitarian economics. But the left’s notion of justice has turned out to be both shallow and calamitous. The left’s agenda has not delivered justice, and indeed, it has blinded us to the fact that justice is what we lack.

While liberals advocated their distorted notion of justice, conservatives abandoned the concept altogether, instead emphasizing freedom and independence in contrast to the left’s egalitarianism. Freedom and independence are valuable things, indispensable in fact, but they are worthwhile precisely because they are just—they are right for the human person. There can be no true freedom apart from a just society. And it will no longer do for conservatives to advocate the former without the latter.

Conservatives must do more than promise to downsize government and let each individual go his own way. They must offer a better vision of a better society, a vision of political justice, with an agenda to match. This is how conservatives can speak to the country’s deepest needs, and this is how conservatives can summon the nation again to its highest potential. For if justice is the supreme achievement of a free people, to call Americans to justice is to call them to greatness.

**Justice and Government**

To reclaim the quest for justice, conservatives must first clarify for themselves what justice really means. They can start by rejecting the left’s wrongheaded view.

The liberal vision of justice can be traced to the French Revolution, with its cry of liberté, égalité, fraternité. The middle term was the decisive
one: The revolutionaries insisted on the absolute equality of citizens as
the touchstone of a just society. No distinctions of rank or wealth were
to be permitted, in theory anyway, because no such distinctions were
natural to man. The revolutionaries distrusted civil society, with its myri-
aid little groups and private associations, as a redoubt of inequality and
“unnatural” distinction. Fraternité — brotherhood — was to be achieved
instead through the state, which would put every citizen on equal foot-
ing and provide a source of common identity. Only then would liberty,
too, be possible.

A century later, Karl Marx gave the Jacobins’ égalité a distinctly mate-
rialist turn. Human beings are the products of their material conditions,
he said; human identity is determined by the means of production. For
Marx, an equality of goods and things was the key to bettering mankind.

American liberals are neither Jacobins nor Marxists, but some of the
claims of both figure prominently in contemporary liberal thought. For
the modern American left, justice is indeed most basically about equal-
ity. And equality is about material things. In his famous book A Theory
of Justice, Harvard philosophy professor John Rawls contended that each
individual is entitled to the same basic goods as every other. New York
University philosophy professor Ronald Dworkin, another liberal icon,
has similarly argued that a just society will afford its citizens “equality
of resources.” When, during the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack
Obama told Joe the Plumber that part of government’s job was to “spread
the wealth around,” he was reaching for this same egalitarian idea.

But why exactly is every citizen entitled to the same basic level of
material well-being? Here modern liberals offer a conventionally 21st-
century answer: Every individual, they say, has the right to be happy. This
equal right to happiness, where happiness is understood as individual
satisfaction, is the ultimate source of modern liberalism’s commitment
to individual equality. Because every person has a right to pursue what
brings him pleasure, every person deserves the resources to make that
pursuit possible. The business of government, therefore, is to deliver
material equality. Liberals champion the state as the agent of equality,
the state as the source of community, and the state as the sponsor of
individual happiness.

This leftist vision of justice has proved enormously influential — but
ultimately empty. Enshrining individual satisfaction as the end goal
of life has left our public dialogue myopic and self-centered. It has
impoverished our understanding of the common good by suggesting that all we as citizens have in common is the right to pursue our individual ends. In the name of guaranteeing equality, it has fostered dependency. In the name of individual choice, it has hollowed out civil society, replacing voluntary associations with the state.

In short, the left’s view of justice has led directly to our present crisis. Edmund Burke’s verdict on the French revolutionaries in 1790 is a fitting epithet for modern Progressives and liberals: They “are so taken up with their theories of the rights of man, that they have totally forgot his nature.”

If conservatives are to speak to the nation’s longing for a fuller notion of justice, they will have to offer a better and truer understanding of man. They will need to remember the ancients’ dictum that the just society is one in accord with human nature. The liberal account of justice pays virtually no attention to individuals’ uniquely human talents and capacities, but these are precisely the key to justice. Despite the innumerable differences between one individual and another, there is a fairly definite set of activities in which most people say they find deep fulfillment: working, inventing, creating, building, serving, teaching, raising a family. All these pursuits have something in common. They all involve the application of human effort to a sphere of the world in order to improve it. The Biblical tradition calls this “exercising dominion,” as in the opening of Genesis, when God gives humans authority over the created order with the responsibility to tend and care for it. In more secular terms, we might call it governing.

To govern is to exert a guiding influence on something or someone else, to manage or direct or shape things. We usually think of it in a political context, but there is nothing inherently political about governing. It can describe any responsible, constructive exercise of care or authority. And understood in this way, it fairly describes many of man’s highest capacities. When an entrepreneur takes an idea and turns it into a business, he is marshaling his talents to build something new; he is governing. When a composer drafts a concerto, he is applying his gifts to the world to create beauty where it did not exist before; he is governing. When a teacher trains a student or a parent rears a child, he directs the child for the child’s improvement — he governs.

The Dutch political theorist and one-time prime minister Abraham Kuyper put it this way: “We with our own human nature are placed in a
nature around us, not to leave that nature as it is, but with an urge and calling within us to work on nature through human art, to ennoble and perfect it.” This is what humans do. Moreover, it is what they want to do, and what they find deep fulfillment in doing.

If a just society is one, as Aristotle said, that honors human nature and enables individuals to flourish, then the society that permits individuals to pursue their vocation as governors is a just society.

This idea of justice is reflected in the central insights of the American tradition. It was Abraham Lincoln who pointed out that if the Declaration of Independence affirms anything, it is the right of the individual to govern himself. Slavery was a moral outrage, Lincoln said, because the slave was a man, and seeing that, it was “a total destruction of self-government, to say that he too shall not govern himself.” As Lincoln explained, the moral equality on which the United States was founded is nothing other than the equal right of every person to “eat the bread, without the leave of anyone else, which his own hand earns,” to provide for his family, to improve his station, and in short, to apply his talents to the world so as to improve both the world and himself: to govern.

It is the statesman’s task to translate these insights into a working political program in response to the problems of the day. For conservatives, that should yield at least two priorities to take to the country: economic reform that expands access to meaningful, remunerative labor, and social reform to refurbish the institutions that make up our civil society.

**WORK AND JUSTICE**

If justice is about enabling citizens to govern and to exercise dominion, then work must play a central role in the just society. Work is one of the principal ways by which individuals take charge of their lives, improve their lots, and forge their identities. It is the primary means by which they better the world around them. Not for nothing did the late Pope John Paul II observe that work “is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question.”

This is a truth the leftist conception of justice misses altogether. Liberals want the state to guarantee material equality in order to achieve justice and they believe this is just as well accomplished by government payments as by personal labor. But in reality, the two are not in the least fungible.
Researchers tell us that meaningful labor is indispensable to forming a sense of purpose and achieving personal fulfillment. People with work are happier than those without it; people whose work is challenging and complex are happier yet, especially over the long run. Work makes individuals more attractive as marriage partners. It enables couples to support children. It confers social standing and opens access to community life. If sufficiently remunerative, work provides resources for education and self-improvement, art and charity.

Work also confers personal independence and that hard-to-define, intangible, yet priceless thing called self-respect. In other words, work is central to human dignity. This is why Lincoln, for one, laid such stress on the right to work. The American system of free labor, he said, is a “just, and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way for all, gives hope to all, and energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all.” Or as the Nobel prize-winning economist Edmund Phelps has observed more recently, “To know the satisfactions of employment — its challenges and learning experiences, and the personal development that comes with mastering jobs — is also one of life’s basic goods.”

These are things no government transfer payment can convey. And that is one reason why the liberal notion of justice ultimately proves so unsatisfying. That view prizes equality of income, but pays no attention to the profound and personal benefits individuals realize when they earn their own way. Justice does not require more programs to guarantee material equality. It requires more access to meaningful work.

A critical problem with the American economy is that too few people have work, and not just because of the most recent recession. While more than 13 million Americans, some 8.6% of the labor force, are currently out of a job — 43% of them for 27 weeks or more — fewer and fewer able-bodied adults are trying to work at all. The labor-force participation rate measures the percentage of adults eligible for employment who are either working or pursuing work, and it has been declining steadily for more than four decades, especially among less-educated men. For example, in 1970, among men aged 25-54 who had obtained less than a high-school diploma, the labor-force participation rate was 93.6%. In 2005, however — the most recent year for which comparable data are available — the rate was just 81.5%.

The social costs of this trend are enormous. Many of those men not working turn to the underground economy, which often means crime.
Others depend on government welfare payments and long-term disability benefits. And then there is the lost economic output from these millions of idle workers, representing billions of dollars every year.

The costs to the individuals themselves are equally staggering. The long-term unemployed are far less likely to succeed in marriage, to be actively involved in their communities, or to advance from one socioeconomic station to another. Just as important is the loss of dignity: To be denied meaningful labor is to be denied the self-mastery and social respect that come with it.

It is not merely that these people do not want to work. It is that many of them cannot find work, or at least cannot find work at wages adequate to their needs. Between the mid-1970s and the mid-’90s, the income available to the lowest quintile of wage earners fell by nearly 20% relative to the median wage. In fact, the relative purchasing power of all workers in the lower half of the wage distribution fell during this period, and after a brief uptick in the late ’90s, has continued to decline. Today, the share of national income brought home by the bottom quintile of workers is the smallest it has been in almost a century. The result is that many workers in the lower reaches of the wage distribution cannot support themselves — to say nothing of families — on the wages available to them. And many of the least-educated cannot get jobs at all.

Lincoln’s idea of a just economy was one defined by upward mobility, in which the “penniless beginner in the world labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself, then labors on his own account … and at length hires another new beginner to help him.” That is the dream of self-improvement and social betterment through honest labor — the American Dream. To the extent that such work is no longer available to a good many Americans, conservatives concerned about justice must insist on expanding opportunity.

This means that conservatives will need to offer something more than austerity. To be sure, the burgeoning budget deficit must be curbed and America’s entitlement programs reformed. The federal government spends far too much year after year, and it taxes too much as well. But while deficit reduction is essential, it is not of itself an alternative to the liberal vision of the just society. Nor is it a solution to the social and economic disaster that vision has wrought. Conservatives’ aim must be not merely to cut spending, but to reform the American economy to include more citizens in meaningful work.
Getting to that more inclusive economy will require conservatives to think beyond austerity, and also to think beyond mere economic growth. Since the late 1970s, growth has been the mainstay of the conservative economic platform, and for good reason: A growing economy provides more jobs at higher wages for more Americans. But the uncomfortable truth is that the relative decline in lower-income wages has persisted across periods of economic boom, and the decline in labor-force participation has too. A rising tide does not necessarily lift all boats, as it turns out.

Getting disadvantaged workers into the labor force will require structural renovation. This need not make conservatives blanch. America’s capitalist economy is constantly evolving. Conservatives should not try to control it, but simply to use wise policy to nudge it toward greater inclusion of disadvantaged workers.

Milton Friedman showed the way—or one way, at least—decades ago with his negative income tax. The idea was to cancel most welfare payments and other sources of government support for the disadvantaged and replace them with direct payments to families. These payments would make up the difference between the family’s actual income and the income at which they would start paying federal taxes. Economist Edmund Phelps has proposed a similar idea tied directly to work: a broad-based wage subsidy in the form of tax credits to every business that hires workers who make a designated amount less than the median wage. These credits would give businesses an incentive to hire workers they otherwise could not afford, thus creating jobs and boosting wages, while inducing the private sector to increase its investment in disadvantaged workers. Like Friedman, Phelps advises that any such subsidy must be coupled with reductions in unemployment benefits and other welfare services to make work comparatively more attractive.

Other possible reform measures include replacing the current tax code, which penalizes investment and innovation, and eliminating the payroll tax, which penalizes labor. Tort reform with new limits on class-action lawsuits would surely help too by curbing the ruinously expensive litigation that discourages entrepreneurs and costs the economy billions each year.

No single proposal mentioned here will suffice; a combination of reforms will be needed. Some will cost money. All will be politically controversial. And thus both hard choices and hard work await. But the looming entitlement crisis may yet prove to be the cornerstone of
a new political bargain that conservatives can offer the country: fewer entitlements, fewer transfers of wealth, and a smaller state in exchange for energetic action to broaden the work force and make low-paying work more rewarding. Where the left seeks to equalize citizens’ incomes, conservatives should seek to include citizens in society’s ongoing project of productive work. That is the start of a conservative agenda for economic justice.

**Justice and Civil Society**

Justice requires social reform as well as economic reform. Individuals cannot flourish, indeed they cannot hope to survive in any meaningful way, apart from the rich lattice of relationships, families, and associations commonly known as civil society. This is a realm that exists apart from the state and independent of its authority. Here, in families and churches, schools and clubs, individuals make something of their lives and truly exercise their capacity to govern.

Yet government has been consuming civil society for years. Like their leftist counterparts around the world, American liberals distrust the social sector as moralistic, unequal, and hidebound. The “little platoons” of family and neighborhood too often stand in the way of making citizens truly equal. Churches and local communities too often impose obligations on individuals that keep them from pursuing happiness. Consequently, since the early part of the last century, Progressives have sought to replace society with government by absorbing the social sector’s teeming variety of voluntary associations into the state.

They have had considerable success, and the consequences are alarming. As government has seized more and more of the functions once performed by society, private associations have faded and diminished. The result is that citizens who might once have taken the lead in educating their communities’ children and providing aid to the indigent have become apathetic. They are less engaged in their communities, less alert to one another’s needs, and far more willing to wait for social problems to be solved by government. The withering of the two-parent family, meanwhile, spurred on by the loss of working-class jobs and the rise of the welfare state, has yielded less social mobility, more child poverty, and — once again — greater dependence on government.

Conservatives concerned about justice must adopt an altogether different approach. They should offer the country an agenda to revivify our
ailing social sector, with at least these two goals in mind: first, encouraging citizens to stop waiting on government to solve social problems and to start taking responsibility for the needs of their own communities, and second, fostering stable, lasting marriages that support stable, lasting families.

Conservatives can begin by ending the state monopoly on the delivery of social services, and by empowering citizens to take back from government the responsibility for social betterment. Private associations—charities, non-profits, religious groups, and businesses—should be actively encouraged to provide as many as possible of the social services government now provides, like running schools, delivering health care, and helping former criminal offenders re-integrate into society. In many cases, these associations should receive tax dollars to do their work. But they should be able to employ their own methods, with their own employees, without interference from the government.

This will require legislation that strengthens the legal autonomy of private groups while opening access to public funds. One example of how such public-private partnerships can work is the city of Indianapolis. In the 1990s, Mayor Stephen Goldsmith permitted private groups to compete to supply many of the city’s services; eventually, this approach reduced the number of non-uniform city employees by 40%—both saving money and improving service.

Conservatives should build on this approach and take it nationwide. This means going well beyond the Bush administration’s efforts to allow faith groups to get a modicum of government funding for their social programs. Conservatives should look instead to transfer the delivery of whole social services to the social sector, bringing in for-profit entities and other non-governmental associations as well as churches and faith groups. The idea is not merely to allow private associations to administer the government’s existing programs, but to transform these services by giving private groups the freedom to meet the underlying social needs in new and innovative ways.

Giving citizens responsibility in this way strengthens the bonds of mutual sympathy in neighborhoods and cities. It tethers individuals to one another and fosters a sense of shared purpose and belonging. In sum, it nourishes just the sort of respect and understanding between citizens that liberals often say they want when they talk about equality, but which no government transfer payment can purchase.
The other major focus of an agenda for social justice must be the family. Copious research and decades of experience have now made it painfully apparent that the slow disintegration of the two-parent family—88% of American children lived in two-parent homes in 1960; in 2010, only 66% did—is fostering poverty and a host of related social ills. Single parenthood is one of the principal causes of childhood poverty, and coupled with the lack of a college education, one of the greatest destroyers of social mobility. Children of single parents are more likely to drop out of high school, to pass up college, to get involved in crime, to get married young, to divorce early, and to have children of their own out of wedlock. The cycle perpetuates itself.

Our society will never be a place where the poor can advance until we get more stable, two-parent families. Justice and strong families hang together. Conservatives should support tax reforms—like increased child credits and marriage credits—that reward two-parent families. They could, as Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam have proposed, consider subsidies to parents who provide child care in the home, or even pension-style credits that reflect the approximate economic value of years spent in household labor. And they should reconsider the wisdom of no-fault divorce.

The vision of social reform that conservatives can offer the country is a lofty one. It is a vision of citizens managing their own lives, not in autonomous isolation but together. In a healthy civil society, citizens, not the government, are responsible for social change. Citizens charter their own schools to educate their children, provide shelter and education to the homeless, start enterprises that create new jobs, and pioneer new methods to help victims of addiction. In a vibrant civil society, ordinary people do a thousand and one things for themselves and for others, without waiting for the state. And the state, in turn, encourages and facilitates these efforts rather than smothering them.

That is a just society. It can be American society if we are willing to give up our pursuit of mere satisfaction and work to achieve what justice requires. That of course is no small task: If justice is the greatest good of all, achieving it will demand much effort, and more than a little sacrifice, over many generations. In short, achieving justice will require a great people. But then the call to justice has always been a call to greatness.
For too many years, we have thought of justice as something government does, rather than as something for which the people are responsible. That is the consequence of misunderstanding justice. When we realize that justice is not primarily about pursuing economic equality or liberating individuals to pursue their separate pleasures, we see that the just society cannot be the creation of the state. It is a way of life forged by the nation’s citizens. A conservative justice agenda must be, above all, about challenging Americans to embrace that high calling.

The just society depends finally on the character of its people. It can be built only by men and women of excellence, who do for themselves rather than depend on government, who commit to serving one another rather than to narrow self-interest, who use their talents to improve, perfect, and ennoble. Americans have been, and long to be again, such a great people. They long for justice. It is time to call them to it.