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From Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, this is *Trending Globally*. I'm Sarah Baldwin. Our guest today is Ramesh Ponnuru. Ramesh is senior editor at *The National Review* where he has covered national politics and public policy for almost 20 years. He's a columnist for *Bloomberg View* and a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Welcome to the show, Ramesh. Thanks for being with us today.

Thanks for having me.

Let's jump right into a couple of the more burning issues of the day. Vice President Pence recently cast a tiebreaking vote to confirm Betsy DeVos as education secretary. You've written that "the power of the federal government to change what goes on in America's classrooms is, in reality, quite limited. It can't vastly improve it. And it can't terribly degrade it." Does that mean you think that DeVos' appointment isn't going to help or hurt public schools, public education?

Well, it means that I think that we all exaggerate the importance of this appointment as we do changes in federal education policy in general. I think that the No Child Left Behind Act that was signed into law in 2002 was a bipartisan attempt to improve American public education from Washington DC. And it ended up demonstrating how limited Washington's power to do that is because Washington is not responsible for most of the funding of American public education.

And that's why it finds that its leverage to insist on changes is smaller than it thought it was. It's also why it finds that its knowledge of what's going on from place to place is more limited than it would like. And so they ended up creating a system with No Child Left Behind that was easily gamed by states and localities and doesn't seem to have had a significant effect on student outcomes.

And while I wouldn't say that marginal changes are unimportant-- and it's possible that she can make marginal improvements, mostly working with Congress-- these sorts of fights lend themselves to a kind of rhetoric of the ruination of American education, the salvation of American education that isn't warranted. And it's actually one of the less important cabinet agencies in that respect.

Well, if that's true, why is it such a polarizing appointment? Is she a proxy for a different conversation?

Well, if you have a particularly strong view of education policy and it's one that aligns with her, you definitely want her there using the bully pulpit to promote those ideas. And if you think that those ideas are deeply mistaken as a lot of other people do, then you don't want somebody to be holding the bully pulpit there. But again, that's really

what we're talking about. There isn't a whole lot that the federal government is going to do to voucherize American education for example.

As much as Betsy DeVos is an advocate of school vouchers and Donald Trump is an advocate of school vouchers, that's not going to happen unless you get Congress to make a massive change in the way American education is structured. And that change, I think, is extremely unlikely.

And another burning issue is President Trump's executive order placing travel restrictions on foreigners from seven countries. And by the time this podcast goes live, the 9th US circuit court of appeals will have heard oral arguments in the case. And regardless of what we think about the executive order, the case seems to be to me shining a light on the relationship between the executive and judicial branches of government more than I've ever noticed, I think, in my lifetime maybe.

And we might even be able to say is it straining that relationship? So I wonder if you think this is healthy or damaging to American democracy?

Well, I suppose you can look at it either way. The glass half full is this is checks and balances working. What I think happened here is that Trump made a campaign promise to have a temporary ban on Muslim immigration to this country. And then he tried to figure out a way, or had his people try to figure out a way, to pursue that basic impulse in a more legally and politically defensible way. And that's how you ended up with this policy.

I don't think that this policy, this executive order, makes any other sense. It doesn't make sense from the standpoint of how do we have an entrance policy that is rationally related to our security interest. It makes sense as a way of how do I make some good on a campaign promise.

And what I think you could end up seeing is a result of this haphazard, not-particularly-thoughtful approach to policy creation is that the courts end up not just slapping down this attempt, but actually curtailing presidential power in a way that hadn't been curtailed before that you had an open question of what the president's authority is. And by trying to wield that power in a particularly ham-handed way, the presidency will end up diminished compared to what it had been at the beginning.

I do think that the Constitution often works that way. There's play in the joints. But if one branch pushes too hard, it can end up losing ground. To have, I think, probably three mixed metaphors in one sentence.

Well, as a literary person, I appreciate all of them. Let's talk a little more generally about the state of our two-party system. Do you think that Republicans and Democrats are going to find a way to work together in the Trump administration?

That would not be the way I would bet. The current political system is characterized by weak parties and strong partisanship. And that means that, if you step out of line with your party, you are going to have a serious problem. And it also means that your party can't really easily make a strategic choice to cooperate because its own base and the interest groups allied with it won't let the party do that.

There has been some discussion of democratic cooperation with the Trump administration on infrastructure that would seem to be the area where there is most likelihood of bipartisan cooperation. But there's a pretty strong sentiment on the part of liberals and Democrats to say, no, we're not going to work with this administration because doing so will legitimize it in a way that we think is dangerous.

And what do you think about that? What do you think about questioning the legitimacy of a presidency or refusing, on principle, to be less partisan?

I understand why Democrats in many, many cases are upset and appalled by this administration. But I think the inauguration is, in itself, pretty legitimizing that you just have already lost that fight because he is, in fact, the elected president of the United States whether or not you like it.

You can't live in your own private reality and decide that you're going to treat laws that he signed as though they didn't have binding force or regulations that his people have promulgated as if they weren't on the books. It just seems to me that an effective opposition party is going to have to move past that.

Since you're here on campus, I thought I'd ask you a question about higher education. And I read that you wrote about the mission of a liberal arts education. You've said that students have to be prepared to shed their unexamined beliefs, even ones that are part of their identities. And you were talking about a conversation you had with Cornel West who called that a form of death, so kind of a radical shedding of something maybe that one has clung to.

Can you think of a time when you've had to let go of a previously held belief and maybe change what you think?

I can think of a lot of them. For one thing, I was not always as conservative as I am now. When I first started being interested in politics, I was more on the moderate, maybe even on the liberal side. But even since becoming conservative, my views on a lot of different issues have changed. I changed my mind about some of the issues related to affirmative action for example. I've changed my mind about some of the issues related to tax policy.

And I think really that it's important to keep on testing your beliefs against reality, testing them for their coherence with other beliefs, and not just sort of falling into a rut where you keep saying the same things that you've been saying forever and ever. Or worse maybe in a way, you switch positions without having really thought it through for political convenience, which is something that is, of course, not unknown in the political world.

Alas. Do you think there's any positions, let's say, that you have now that you cannot imagine reversing on or changing?

Well, it is certainly true that there are different degrees of conviction. For example, I think that we should expand the Earned Income Tax Credit and that that is a much better idea than raising the minimum wage if we want to boost the incomes of the working poor. But that is a preference that is based on a reading of the empirical literature. And that could change.

On the other hand, my belief in the right to life of unborn children is going to be something that's a little more basic. And it's much harder for me to see myself change my mind about that.

That was one of the ones I was thinking of. Yeah, that seems like a--

But people do change their mind on that as well.

Back in 2015, *Politico* magazine asked you if Donald Trump were a demagogue or a truth teller. And you said demagogue. Do you still think so?

Oh, yes. I think that he has, at best, a very passing acquaintance with the truth. And over time-- and I don't know if I really appreciated this as much at that time. And it's something where my views have maybe evolved just based on further exposure to Trump as a public figure.

I think he's a particular kind of demagogue, a populist demagogue. And the danger of that kind of political figure is that he identifies himself as the voice of the people. That's why he gets so irate about the fact that he'd lost the popular vote. It's why he obsesses about the crowd figures at the inauguration because his conceit is he is in some kind of almost metaphysical way bonded with the popular will.

Now, it's a very dangerous view in a pluralistic and democratic country because it means that you are inclined to view the opposition as, per se, illegitimate because, if they're opposing you, they're opposing the people.

And let's stick with him for a minute. And I'm thinking of his campaign slogan, make America great again, and one America. And so I'm thinking about his promise to repeal the Affordable Care Act or dismantle it or somehow rework it, substitute something else for it. And so how do you think that that's going to be a good thing for the general health and welfare of the most vulnerable Americans in that one America, right?

Well, it depends on how it's done and, of course, if it's done. I've been advocating a particular approach to health care reform for several years that I think would achieve the objectives that Trump has outlined, which is that you replace Obamacare, you fix some of the problems that are associated with Obamacare, and, at the same time,

you make sure that people have coverage and that people have protection for preexisting conditions.

And I think that the key idea behind a replacement policy would be that we are going to facilitate everybody in the country being able to purchase at least catastrophic health coverage but that we are not going to have a heavy federal regulatory hand that the precise dimensions of that insurance policy are going to be determined by individual family preferences.

Maybe you want a more comprehensive policy. Maybe you want a policy that only covers catastrophic expenses and protects you against that kind of major financial setback as a result of health care events. That I think is the basic idea. Fleshing out that idea some colleagues of mine and I did in a 100-page report of a year and a half ago is a different thing. And whether the political process is capable of yielding it is yet a third thing.

Can we just stay with that word "facilitate"? What do you mean by facilitate? What would that look like?

I guess one way of thinking about it is, if you're-- for those of us who are conservative opponents of Obamacare, what is the principle objection we have to Obamacare? And it seems to me that, if you think about it, the right way of thinking about anyway that was problematic about Obamacare isn't that it subsidized people so that they could afford insurance because that's something that the federal government has been doing for decades and decades, whether it's through the tax break for employer-provided insurance or Medicare or Medicaid.

Now, you can argue, and I would argue, that the subsidies in Obamacare are structured badly. And you could argue that they're too expensive. But the fundamental problem it seems to me was that there was a top-down vision of what insurance markets will look like. And there's a heavy degree of centralized regulatory control in Washington DC.

And if you think about the problems that people have had with Obamacare, whether it's cancellation of plans because they don't comply with new regulations or it's high deductibles because they can't buy policies that just cover catastrophic expenses because that's illegal under Obamacare, they all come back to this regulatory centralization.

And what we would do is we'd continue to have subsidies. We would have subsidies which enabled people to participate in the market. But the market would be freer, looser, and more flexible.

Well, we'll see. We'll see if-- do you have the ear of President Trump, you and your colleagues who wrote the 100-page report?

I think that some of my co-authors were and are less critical of Trump in public than I have been and am and perhaps have the ear of people in his administration more than I do.

Ramesh, you've been called a conservative reformer. Can you explain what that means?

So over the last few years, I became associated with a school of thought that was called reform conservatism. And our basic idea was that the conservative program had been formulated in the late 1970s and early 1980s to address a set of specific challenges and problems that faced America at that time. And circumstances had changed, but the conservative program hadn't adapted to those changes.

And so as a result, conservatism was a little bit calcified and stale intellectually. And politically, it was losing its connection with the voters as a result. And so what we were trying to do-- and in some ways, still are trying to do-- is to update and modernized conservatism. So we apply conservative insights to the problems that we face today.

As an example, conservatism has a preference for lower taxes rather than higher taxes. But the way you operationalize that, it seems to me, ought to look different now when our top tax rate is 39.6% than it did in 1981 when the top tax rate was 70%. And too many conservatives kept acting as though this were still 1981.

I see. OK, so there is reform in conservatism.

I think that the task of conservatism always has to be to make it new, to take the old principle and apply them to ever-changing circumstances. We were talking about health care. That's a perfect example. Health care reform was not as pressing a priority in 1979.

Health care was a smaller share of the American economy. The costs were more manageable. And frankly, health care could do less than it can do now. And so it made sense that health care was sort of an afterthought to the conservative program of the Reagan era. But that has become more and more of a problem that conservatism hasn't had much to say about health care. And we've seen that become a really debilitating problem over the last decade.

I have another question about you. You're a thinker and a writer, a commentator. Has politics ever tempted you? Because clearly, you think deeply about these issues. And you're not neutral. You want to see change in a certain direction. Have you ever considered a career in politics?

I have occasionally thought about a job in politics, working for a politician, working for an elected official. But the idea of asking people for money or going all over the place and saying the same things over and over again has never had a great deal of appeal to me. I'm not an extrovert. And it's pretty hard to make that kind of political career if you're not.

Well, self-awareness is a good thing. So if you weren't a commentator and writer and thinker, what would you be?

What did you want to be when you were 10?

Well, I think my parents thought I would be a doctor like everybody else in our family. And I thought, beginning around that time, that maybe I would be a lawyer. I was interested in a law.

Yeah, you're very interested in law.

I did think about going to law school. So that would have been one potential route.

But you never wanted to be an astronaut or--

It may be that, when I was in single digits, that sort of thing had some appeal to me. I was talking to a nephew a couple of years ago about his career ambitions as one does. And I believe astronaut was on his list, but so was wizard.

Awesome. Ramesh, thank you so much for coming and talking with us today. It's been a real pleasure.

You're welcome. The pleasure was mutual.

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