

THE POLITICS OF CHILD ABUSE REPORTING

Media coverage of the sexual abuse of minors has long been biased against the Catholic Church.

As virtually everyone knows by now, there is not a single institution in the nation where adults and minors interact on a regular basis that has not been rocked by sexual misconduct. Indeed, there is no institution in the nation where adults mingle with other adults that has not been touched by sexual improprieties. Why, then, the constant bias, especially regarding adults and minors, in reporting on this subject?

Take, for example, the Child Victims Act in New York State. This year, as in the past, there was an attempt to revise the law regarding the age at which alleged victims could bring suit. Few disagree with this objective. More controversial is the one-year window, the so-called “look-back” provision: it would allow victims one year to file suit for alleged offenses that occurred at any time in the past.

From reading the newspapers, listening to radio news, and watching TV reporting, the average person would conclude that only the Catholic Church opposes the Child Victims Act. This is a lie. Many organizations have worked against this bill. They have done so precisely because of the inherent injustice attendant to the “look-back” provision. Before naming these groups, consider why they object.

How can claims be fairly adjudicated in cases where the alleged offender, and the alleged victim, offer contrasting accounts about something that may or may not have happened decades ago? Indeed, the accused may be dead. Moreover, sexual offenses rarely take place in public, making moot the role of witnesses.

Statutes of limitation exist for a basic civil libertarian reason: They were crafted to protect the due process rights of the accused. They were not dreamed up by uncaring and unscrupulous parties looking to dodge the reach of the law.

So who else has been on record opposing the Child Victims Act? Orthodox Jews, the Boy Scouts, foster care agencies, insurance companies, and—most importantly—teachers unions.

Nowhere in America is child sexual abuse tolerated with greater impunity than in the local public school. When molesters are charged, they are often given a desk job, doing the kind of makeshift work that is itself a public rip-off; as we have seen in New York City, this can go on for years. Why? Because of pressure from the teachers unions.

Some journalists note that when proposed changes in the statute of limitations are made, the public schools, unlike the Catholic Church, remain on the sidelines. This is true. The reporters should say why. It is because the public schools are protected by state sovereign immunity statutes, legal measures that allow a short period of time, usually 90 days, in which to file suit. In other words, the proposed changes rarely apply to the public schools.

What about those instances when proposed changes explicitly apply to the public schools? That's when the public school lobbyists kick into high gear, making the exact same arguments against the "look-back" provision that the Catholic Church makes. So why don't we hear about this? Because of media bias.

In 2017, the United Federation of Teachers and the New York State United Teachers spent over \$1 million lobbying against the Child Victims Act. With the exception of WNBC-TV news, and a columnist from the Albany Times Union, Chris Churchill, no one in the media has mentioned this.

The *New York Times*, the *Daily News*, and the *Times Union*, as well as virtually all newspapers in the Empire State, have

editorialized in favor of the Child Victims Act, and almost invariably they criticize the Catholic Church for opposing it. Orthodox Jews and the Boy Scouts are occasionally mentioned, but social service agencies and insurance companies never are. Most indefensible, the teachers unions are always given a pass.

This amounts to a cover-up by omission. The media have underplayed the principled reasons for opposing the “look-back” provision and overplayed the role of the Catholic Church in fighting it. It’s time the truth were told and politics were put aside.