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A Pact with Parents

A Speech by Chris Bell

Delivered at the University of Texas at Austin, Aug. 14, 2005

Chris Bell may deviate from his prepared remarks.

Thank you for coming today.

My name is Chris Bell and I am running for governor of the great state of Texas.

I am running for governor because my patience with Rick Perry has run out. He isn't leading us to the Promised Land. He hasn't ruined Texas...yet, and it's still one of the greatest places on the face of the earth, but it's not the state I grew up in. I am getting sick and tired of Texas being the headquarters of the Thank God for Mississippi Committee.

We've got a 19th-century tax system funding a 20th-century school system, and Rick Perry's 21st-century solution to all this is to tax exotic dancers¹ or candy bars² or bottled water³ depending on which day of the week you happen to speak with him. It's not exactly profiles in courage over there.

You can't base our state's future on half-truths and baloney any more than you can build a house on sinking sand.⁴

It's becoming increasingly obvious that Rick Perry just doesn't get it, that he doesn't understand that budgets are moral documents⁵ - that there are human costs attached to the fiscal decisions. And I might not have all the answers, but at least I

¹ "Events Related to Strippers," Harper's Magazine, at <http://www.harpers.org/Stripper.html>.

² "LBB Analysis Hits the News," Off the Kuff, Mar. 9, 2005, at <http://www.offthekuff.com/mt/archives/005080.html>.

³ "Texas House passes bottled water tax," Water Tech Online, May 2005, at <http://www.watertechonline.com/article.asp?IndexID=6635335>.

⁴ This is a reference to Matthew 7:24-27.

⁵ Jim Wallis, "God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It," Harper San Francisco, 2005, p. xxi.

know enough to listen when Texans tell me what they want from their leaders.

Everywhere I go in Texas, people tell me that they want leaders who see the world the way it is and not the way it polls; they want leaders who have the moral courage to tell us what they feel to be true and not what they think we want to hear. Texans are hungry for a governor who can apply something as radical as common sense to our problems and not simply pander to the issue of the day.

And everywhere I go in Texas, people tell me that they are sick and tired of being told that they aren't good Christians or don't have any morals just because they don't believe in Rick Perry's cynical partisan agenda. Well, if Rick Perry thinks that he can claim the moral high ground, then he's very, very wrong. Rick Perry couldn't find the moral high ground with a map and a sherpa.

The 21st century isn't about the liberals versus the conservatives but the difference between right and wrong, between what works versus what doesn't. The New Mainstream⁶ is waiting for someone to start getting serious about solutions. The old ways are not working. What we clearly need is something completely different.

What we need is a governor who belongs to the New Mainstream. When Rick Perry says he's representing the mainstream all he's really doing is putting a fence around a narrow section of partisan ideologues and telling the rest of us "adios,"⁷ leaving a huge majority of people on the outside. Remarkably, the New Mainstream is filled with solution-oriented people of all stripes—the moderate Republicans who Rick Perry is trying to kick out of his party, the independents who are getting quite scared about what's going on, and the Democrats who knew from the start that Rick Perry couldn't lead a silent prayer.

If this were just a regular, politics-as-usual campaign, this is the point where I would tell you that I am running for governor for the children. And that's the point in the speech where you would tune me out as just another politician.

⁶ Economist Richard Florida originated this phrase. Richard Florida, "The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life," Perseus Books Group; 1st edition (April, 2002), pp. 210-11.

⁷ If you don't get this reference, welcome to Texas. See: http://politicalwire.com/archives/2005/06/22/quote_of_the_day.html.

Instead, let me do something a little different. Let me tell you the truth. I've been to Washington. I've spent a little time in Austin. Government can't raise your kids and it shouldn't even try. Alison and I know, just like you do, that raising our kids is our job.

In fact, good parents matter more for kids than anything I could do as governor. We as a society have gotten so far away from the importance of parents in kids' lives that it actually took a study by some psychologist from Notre Dame to remind the pundits and PhD's what everyone here knows—parents matter.⁸

So I'm going to make a Pact with the Parents of Texas, and we're going to do it by applying something as radical as common sense to the way the world really works.

We're going to do this by making insurance companies stop robbing us and start covering us including, by the way, every single kid in Texas.

We're going to help you protect your kids from crippling credit card debt.

We're going to make it a crime for someone to sell our kids content in a video game that they couldn't sell them in a *Playboy* magazine.

We're going to reduce the number of abortions in Texas by telling our kids the truth about how not to get pregnant in the first place.

We're going to cure disease by getting stem cell research out of the abortion wars and into the research labs.

And, best of all, we're going to make Texas public schools the best in the country by letting teachers teach our kids something more useful than how to take yet another standardized test.

Life goes by so fast these days that there's no way we can do this alone. Heck, we struggle just to get everyone to the table for a family dinner, but Rick Perry seems to believe we should be on our own in this world against these forces. But we are not alone. We have each other. We are all God's children. *Todos*

⁸ Beth Azar, "How do parents matter? Let us count the ways," *Monitor on Psychology*, Volume 31, No. 7, July/August 2000, at <http://www.apa.org/monitor/julaug00/parents.html>.

estamos en esto juntos. And if we are all in this together, it's time that we start acting like it.

Today, because of where we find ourselves on this wonderful campus, we are reminded of the great Martin Luther King. And perhaps Dr. King said it best when he said, "We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools."

Because if we work together, we can give you more control over your lives so you can spend more time and energy on your most important job—being a parent.

As governor, I'll treat you like the most important person in your kids' lives and not as an individual consumer swimming against an ever-increasing tidal wave of debt, turmoil and garbage.

My Pact with Parents starts with doing everything I can to reform the most corrupt state government in a generation. Corporate cash is infecting our elections, and corporate lobbyists are stopping any chance of progress. We must demand political reforms to make our campaigns and our government more transparent and accountable. We can reclaim the courthouse square of state government, coming together in the public space that Rick Perry and his lobbyist friends have polluted with their cash-and-carry corruption.

We need to start with the insurance lobbyists. Insurance companies are ripping us off. They're keeping about 70 cents of every dollar we pay them, overcharging us by about \$4 billion a year, and covering less and less all the time. As governor, I'll appoint an insurance commissioner who will make them lower their rates, putting \$600 for each home and \$200 for each vehicle back in your bank account where it belongs.⁹

Of course, if you're like most people, you'll probably just use that money to pay down your credit card debt. Government can't make people spend more responsibly, but we can start teaching our kids financial literacy in schools,¹⁰ limit credit card marketing practices that target young people and maybe put some

⁹ Center for Economic Justice and Texas Watch, "Insurers Price Gouge Texas Policyholders by \$4 Billion in 2004," Mar. 31, 2005.

¹⁰ Modeled after Scared Straight, CARE—Credit Abuse Resistance Education, connects judges, attorneys and trustees with high school and college students to warn them about the dangers of excessive consumer debt. Julie Sturgeon, "Younger Americans Going Deeper into Debt," Bankrate.com.

limits on outrageous interest rates. We need to give people a fighting chance at financial freedom.

And one way we help parents attain financial freedom is by making sure Texas doesn't lead the nation in the number of uninsured. Families without insurance¹¹ don't go without healthcare. They just go to emergency rooms and get the most expensive, fiscally irresponsible health care imaginable—and the costs get passed onto local taxpayers.¹²

Prevention is worth more than a pound of cure. When it comes to children's health insurance, prevention is worth about 800 million federal dollars that Rick Perry turned away for kids' health insurance.¹³ I'll fight for every cent we have coming to us from Washington.

Parents are nearly powerless to filter out a commercial culture that relentlessly pushes a permissive attitude toward explicit sex and violence. We need to find the moral courage to empower parents in this battle, and let's start with violent video

¹¹ Texas has the highest rate of uninsured residents at 24.6 percent (That's 5.4 million Texans) and the highest rate of uninsured kids at 22.7 percent. Texans are also less likely to get insurance through their jobs than in other states. At 53.4 percent, the amount of employer insurance coverage in Texas is significantly lower than the national average of 62.2 percent for 2003, reflecting rising insurance costs that are hitting small businesses particularly hard. See: <http://www.stateline.org/stateline/?pa=story&sa=showStoryInfo&id=395256> and <http://www.calinst.org/bulletins/b10241.htm>.

¹² The Texas Hospital Association reports that "uncompensated care provided by Texas hospitals has increased from \$3 billion in 1993 to more than \$7.7 billion in 2003. In 2003, Texas hospitals reported \$3.5 billion in bad debts and \$4.2 billion in charity care." (Bad debts include unpaid co-pays and deductibles for those with insurance as well as for non-indigent persons without insurance. Charity care is uninsured poor folks.) The Office of the Comptroller released a study a few years back that showed that the bulk of the cost of unreimbursed health care falls to local governments, private providers and charities, with the state picking up a sizable chunk, and the federal government a pittance. See: <http://www.window.state.tx.us/uninsure/>.

¹³ In an effort to close the \$10-billion shortfall in 2003, Rick Perry signed a budget that made it harder for people to qualify for the Children's Health Insurance Program, resulting in 170,000 kids getting dumped from the health care program that covers the children of parents with jobs that pay them just enough not to qualify for poverty programs. The state's miserly attitude toward the popular federal program has resulted in turning away \$808.1 million in unspent federal matching funds since 2000, according to the Health and Human Services Commission. See: [http://www.statesman.com/metrostate/content/auto/epaper/editions/monday/metro_state_247002cc216552ee00d3.html?UrAuth=%60NcNUOcN\[UbTTUWUXUTUZT\[UUUWUcU_UZUaU^UcTYWVVZV](http://www.statesman.com/metrostate/content/auto/epaper/editions/monday/metro_state_247002cc216552ee00d3.html?UrAuth=%60NcNUOcN[UbTTUWUXUTUZT[UUUWUcU_UZUaU^UcTYWVVZV).

games. In any of the "Grand Theft Auto" video games, the player can beat up old ladies, steal cars, murder police officers, run over pedestrians, and pick up and murder prostitutes.¹⁴ Other states have made it a crime to sell this crud to our kids without a parent's say-so, and I think we should do the same here in Texas.¹⁵

We also need to find the moral courage accept the hard truth that no one will win the trench warfare between the pro-life and pro-choice armies until we reclaim the common ground. Let's start by applying something as radical as common sense to the problem and say we're going to reduce the number of abortions in Texas by reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies.

You can't have it both ways - you can't say you're against abortion and then work so diligently to prevent young people from having what they need to avoid getting pregnant in the first place.

If we can agree on that, then we can face the teen pregnancy crisis with an open mind and a servant's heart. We have the highest teen pregnancy rate in the country.¹⁶ We need to reduce the number of abortions that teen pregnancy causes by giving our kids the medically accurate, age-appropriate information they need to know so they don't get pregnant in the first place.¹⁷

And while we're on the subject of abortion politics, can we just ask why stem cell research got dragged into this? We have the best doctors in the world here in Texas, but they're falling

¹⁴ See: <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/B0000500I2/104-7750026-2859167?v=glance>.

¹⁵ Reuters, "Illinois bans graphic video games to minors," MSNBC, Jul. 27, 2005, at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8723546/>.

¹⁶ See: <http://www.protectourkids.com/facts.shtml>.

¹⁷ Age-appropriate, medically accurate sex education in high schools would be a decent first step that would bring the curriculum within state guidelines. Ending abstinence-only education, which increases rates of unprotected sex but does nothing to prevent or to delay premarital sex, would bring Texas in line with the entire scientific community. See: <http://www.ppfa.org/pp2/portal/medicalinfo/teensexualhealth/fact-abstinence-education.xml>.

In Aug. 2004, the Texas Poll reported that 90 percent of Texans "favor teaching students age-appropriate, medically accurate information on abstinence, birth control and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV." That was up from 86 percent on the same question in 2001. See: <http://www.protectourkids.com/press.release.7sept2004.shtml>.

behind the competition in Korea.¹⁸ We need to have faith in the future and fund stem cell research just like California and New York State and Illinois have done.

My mom died in 1999 after a 10-year-long battle with Parkinson's disease. I know the toll a disease like that takes on a family and I will do anything to spare other families from going through the same. Rick Perry says that as long as he's governor, he'll "oppose any taxpayer dollars" going to fund stem cell research. Rick Perry is dead wrong. Jesus didn't tell us to heal the sick unless politics got in the way. When he healed the lepers, He didn't worry about slippery slopes and poll numbers. Curing disease is the right thing to do.

But the main thing we want for our kids is for them to get a good education. And I'm going to tell you the hard truth that good just isn't going to be good enough any more, not nearly good enough.

We know that an investment in education trumps the economic development benefit of a toll road¹⁹ or a tax break for yet another big box superstore.²⁰ Every family in this state knows that the next generation will join the New Mainstream when our state government realizes that the law of diminishing returns does not apply to our children.

My Pact with Parents promises that if they get their kids ready to learn, then we'll make sure that teachers have the freedom and the resources they need to teach our kids what they need to know in the 21st Century. And if we are going to make teaching

¹⁸ See: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8159920/>.

¹⁹ Richard Florida, "Creative Class War: How the GOP's anti-elitism could ruin America's economy," Washington Monthly, January/February 2004, at <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2004/0401.florida.html> (last visited February 28, 2005).

²⁰ The Texas Enterprise Fund, which the Center for Public Policy Priorities called a "slush fund for the Governor," has given mammoth subsidies and tax breaks to big-box stores, including \$8.5 million for a new Home Depot in Austin, \$600,000 for a Cabela's in Buda, and Mike Ward, 'How Texas plays 'let's make a deal' for jobs: Officials swear by largely secret process of doling out big bucks of Enterprise Fund," Austin American-Statesman, February 21, 2005, at http://jobs.statesman.com/wl/Content.jsp?Content=/careercenter/articles/20050221_texas.html (last visited February 28, 2005), and "78th Legislature-1st Special Session, Center for Public Policy Priorities, Jul. 7, 2003, No. 196, at <http://www.cppp.org/products/policypages/191-210/html/pp196.html> (last visited February 28, 2005).

our kids the highest purpose of government, then we need to give greater rewards to those doing the teaching.

And we need to admit that tuition deregulation is a miserable failure. Rick Perry asked for it,²¹ and we got the highest tuition increases in the country.²² Let's put that genie back in the bottle and make tuition at our state colleges and universities affordable for middle class families again.

Rick Perry wants you to believe that we are on the right track on education. Don't you be fooled. The so-called "Texas Miracle" is nothing more than a politically expedient mirage. It's nothing more than Enron-style "accountability,"²³ and it has corrupted the curriculum and increased the dropout rate to around 40 percent—the highest in the country.²⁴

The folks running schools from Austin think they can use tests to make our kids smarter. A test won't make you smarter just like a ruler won't make you any taller.²⁵ Testing isn't the answer; it's just another way to ask the question, but Rick Perry and the lobbyists for the testing companies either don't get it or hope you haven't yet figured it out.²⁶

²¹ On Jun. 22, 2003, Rick Perry signed HB 3015, deregulating college tuition after lobbying for it. See: www.edpolicy.org/legislation/bills/2003/txh3015.pdf.

²² Thanks to tuition deregulation passed in 2003, the tuition at the University of Texas at Austin rose 37 percent, the highest jump of any school in the country according to the Chronicle of Higher Education. See: http://www.news8austin.com/content/top_stories/default.asp?ArID=129349. Statewide, tuition at all Texas state colleges and universities rose an average of 23 percent since fall 2003. See: http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/stategov/stories/MYSA021305.25A.tx_tomorrow.a110f5bb.html.

²³ Linda McSpadden McNeil of Rice University first compared the way Enron over-relied upon its stock price and hid debt with how the Texas education system uses one test score as its sole measurement while relying in part upon drop outs to hide its failures. Angela Valenzuela, editor, "Leaving Children Behind," 2005, pp. 65-8.

²⁴ "The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) in San Antonio, a research organization that has tracked statewide dropouts since 1986, put the dropout rate in 2001 conservatively at 40%. IDRA Director Maria Montecel sees the state's official figures as 'camouflage'..." Valenzuela, p. 75.

²⁵ To be fair, we know of no peer-reviewed scientific studies that have determined how a ruler affects height in human beings. And let's not even get into the whole animal testing thing. Just trying to make a humorous point here to highlight the absurdity of the twisted logic of the status quo.

²⁶ Emily Pyle, "TeSt Market," Texas Observer, May 13, 2005.

We know how to improve our schools. We need to put principals and teachers back in control of schools and classrooms and give them textbooks that aren't censored by Soviet-style word police. We need to give them the materials they need to teach, the technology needed for kids to learn, and the freedom to use their best judgment and not just take orders from Austin - and then we might really witness a miracle.

We need a governor who wants to take advantage of the knowledge that exists to make schools not just better but the best. And this is the big payoff of my Pact with the Parents of Texas. If you do your part, then I'll do everything I can to make Texas public schools the best in the country. I'm calling for nothing less than a moon shot for public schools in Texas with a specific goal of having the best public schools in the country in 10 years. It is a realistic goal because this is Texas. And it's time for us to start leading again.

I think the priorities in my Pact with Parents offer a solution to the problem that is Rick Perry. It is not enough to be right about Rick Perry being wrong. We can no longer charge into battle and assume that our armies are right behind us. We need to give the people of Texas something worth fighting for.

In short - how can we call ourselves "progressive" if we fail to offer progress? It is our duty to restore Texas pride by finding common ground solutions and working together to make this state what we all know it can be.

This is where I want to lead Texas as governor. Come on over to the New Mainstream, my friends. If we choose to stand together, there's not an election we can't win. If we work together, no one can defeat us. We can build a better Texas. And we can build it - together!