

Giving Done Right, Season 5, Episode 14 – Ezra Klein on Philanthropy's Role at a Precarious Time

Grace: Welcome to Giving Done Right. I'm Grace Nicolette.

Phil: And I'm Phil Buchanan.

Grace: Today, we'll be sharing an interview we recorded live at the CEP conference last month with Ezra Klein. Ezra is of course well known as a New York Times columnist and podcast host. We wanted to have Ezra on because he is so influential and because he has been critical of some nonprofits supported by progressive donors, in particular. We also wanted to talk with him about his arguments in his recent book *Abundance*, co-authored with Derek Thompson, which argues for reconceiving how government works, and what the implications of that might be for philanthropy.

Phil: Yeah Grace, I thought this was a fascinating conversation. CEP is obviously a nonpartisan organization and we don't get involved in politics. We do not endorse any candidates or political parties. And we work with all kinds of donors and foundations – some of which I think people would consider on the left ideologically, some of which might be considered on the right in terms of their goals and approaches ... but many of which honestly you couldn't really categorize in terms of ideology. But Ezra's arguments have broad relevance, I think, for donors across the ideological spectrum in this time of polarization in our country. One of the central arguments he makes in our interview is about working with folks you don't agree with on everything in order to get important things done. And he does tend to focus on that dynamic within the Democratic party, because he's very much in that world, but it's really a broader point than that I think. And he describes, for example in our interview, how he sought to connect with those mourning the loss of Charlie Kirk after his assassination even though he vehemently disagreed with Kirk's politics.

Grace: Yes, that was fascinating because he's gotten a lot of critique for that but when you asked him about it, he really expressed no regret about the piece that he wrote. The other thing that made this discussion really relevant to donors are the concerns about the state of civil society and nonprofits broadly. The facts are, and our colleague Elisha Smith Arrillaga laid these out both at the conference and on this podcast recently, nonprofits are reeling from federal funding cuts simultaneous with increasing demand for their services. So that was a sort of backdrop for this conversation too, and Ezra has some strong views on how civil society and business leaders have – or haven't – met the moment.

Phil: Yes, he definitely did not hold back. OK, so here is our interview, recorded November 4 in front of an audience of 600 philanthropic leaders and donors, at the Intercontinental Hotel in Los Angeles.

[APPLAUSE]

Phil: [00:01:19] Ezra, so excited to talk to you. In the early days of the second Trump administration, which feels a little bit like 100 years ago, you had a piece that was called *Don't Believe Him*, and you said, you know, there's some institutional guardrails. And fast forward to early September, you had another piece that I think was called *If the Democrats Have a Better Plan, I'd Like to Hear It*, in which you argued for the shutdown. I think the headline somewhere else maybe in the times was, this is not normal. And I guess, can we

start with how you're seeing things in terms of where we are and the level of surprise or concern you have about what has actually occurred and how quickly it has occurred.

Ezra Klein: [00:02:20] Sure, the easy questions. So Don't Believe Him I should say because I think it reflects well I'll answer this question wasn't about the existence of institutional guardrails it was about the necessity of organized opposition and friction the point of Don't Believe Him is it power is a social construct if the president says he has power and nothing is done to assert that he does not, where he does not, then that power comes into existence. Power is everywhere a coordination problem. Donald Trump does not go door to door enforcing his agenda. He coordinates using the power of the federal government to do so. And I would say what we have seen since then is very inconsistent performance on behalf of other parts of civil society and the various institutions of American life. So civil society has largely been like a horrifying disappointment. You look at what the business leaders were like in the first term. You look at, say, Jeff Bezos personally approving the motto, democracy dies in darkness for the Washington Post. And in the second term, Amazon Prime paying, what was it, \$40 million for two Melania Trump biopics. You look at the way the richest people in society, when the regime said you pay to play, they walked up and they paid. You look at the way law firms began to fall in a correlated way, beginning with Paul, Weiss. You look at how weak the universities were until it got to Harvard. When I said, don't believe him, my point was that you have to make this not true. And in many ways, much of society made it true. The same is true, by the way, institutionally, for the House and the Senate and the courts. There it's a more complicated question, because fundamentally what is happening there is that the House, and the Senate, and courts are under Republican control. And Republicans is not a question of believing or not believing, it is a question of supporting or not supporting. And right now, Republicans support him. But Trump does not like moving through high levels of resistance. Where there has been heavy resistance to the National Guard, they've tended to sort of moderate or back off. You just saw with China, they don't want to trade war with China. To the extent China is not just going to bend the knee to them, they're going to back off a little bit. Trump tests boundaries. And what he has found is that many of the boundaries right now are not firm. A couple of them are, but many are not. And so we are further down the path to the guardrails of the system. Forget not holding, not being there. Congress has chosen, the people in charge of Congress have chosen not to be a guardrail. He didn't break them. They just decided they didn't want to do it. Congress could decide tomorrow he does not have his tariff power. They choose to give him this tariff of power. So I think it's an important thing to distinguish here. That's why the elections today matter, why the election in a year will matter. Right now there is no power center for organized opposition. There's the no kings marches, there is I think growing resistance in parts of civil society. We can obviously talk about the non-profit and foundation sector. But there is not really a base of alternative power that he's run into and as such he and his administration have gone very far very fast

Phil: [00:06:16] Can you say a little bit more about what you would like to see?

Ezra Klein: [00:06:22] I would like to see the people who lead important parts of civil society not be cowards. I would like, I think many of these people know perfectly well that a system like ours can break, that the businesses that have taken root here, that the universities, that the law firms that have taken root here rely on a minimal level of system neutrality. And when Tim Cook goes and gives Donald Trump a golden bauble to win his favor that's bad. When the Republicans in Congress give up their spending power and accept levels of corruption that if you had described it to them a couple of years ago, they would have blanched. That's bad. The system does not have an automatic quality to it. It

does ultimately rely on human beings making decisions to speak up and put themselves at some risk. President Obama recently, when he's been out on the trail, when he was giving interviews with Mark Maron, one thing he said is that, you know, we believed all these things, but it was easy for us to believe them. Most of us in this generation, we've not had to risk anything to believe in democracy, not had risk anything, to believe, in freedom, not had a risk anything to believe this system we paid so much lip service to. Like right now, the Republican Party is having an interesting internal debate on whether or not just modern neo-Nazi should be a respected member of their coalition. Like, that's where we are, right? Like, Ted Cruz and Ben Shapiro have said no. Plenty of others, including the Heritage Foundation, have said, no enemies to the right, right, like no cancelation, no censure, right. We can have a vigorous debate over how big of a problem American Jewry is. Human beings have to make decisions about what stances and orientations they will take in this moment. And I would like to see them make better ones in many cases.

Phil: [00:08:36] Yeah, and I keep going back to this Frederick Douglass quote from 1857. If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Men who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are like those who want crops without plowing up the ground and it goes on from there. Where is that recognition that it's not necessarily going to be easy, and it certainly hasn't been at other times. In our history.

Grace: [00:09:07] I feel like there's a profound sense of fear about what could happen if one does speak up and I wanna address that in the room and I'm wondering if you could speak to that. Like we need to be bold and courageous in this moment and yet sometimes it feels like the stakes are high, are they?

Ezra Klein: [00:09:24] I think so, I mean, but they're high for all of us and they're not higher than they are in other countries or even in this country at different times. We are not being called to a level of courage or bravery that is historically unusual. Many of us came up, I came up in an aberrant period of relative peace where we came to take the fundamental tenets of liberalism for granted. But that's not what it was like in the long period of the two red scares in the 20th century. That's not what it was like for the freedom riders. That's not what it was like for the suffragettes. That's not what it's like to try to bring down communist regimes in Eastern Europe. That's not what it is like to be now or previously a dissident in Russia. Not what it's like to be a dissident in Hungary. The idea that this is somehow profoundly unusual is just not true. And none of us want it, right? I don't like worrying more about my own security. I've not enjoyed that transition. But nobody is necessarily called to be in a position of social responsibility. It is a choice we make. We can live quieter lives. What I've in many cases noticed though is there's a lot more bravery among those living quieter lives than those who have called themselves into a position to social responsibility Like, what the f*** is it? Sorry. What is the point? What is the point of all this money if it doesn't give you independence? What are the point to these huge endowments if they don't give freedom of movement? It is the people who have the most optionality, who have decided they have the to lose, but they don't have the the most to lose. The people with the most to lose are the people who are getting pulled out of cars by people in masks. The people whose names we don't know. So I have very little sympathy for this. And I don't think I say that without having, like asking the same of myself. I don't think there's any particular bravery to what I am doing. I also don't think it would be particularly brave for Tim Cook to not be presenting Donald Trump with golden objects. I don't think it would be particularly brave for Mark Zuckerberg to speak out a little bit in favor of all this free speech that he claimed to believe in so strongly eight months ago. Right, I don't think so much is asked of us. And yet I think many of us are falling well beneath even that low bar.

Grace: [00:11:54] So in the weeks and months after the presidential election, you've talked about how progressive groups, advocacy nonprofits, single issue funders and activists helped pull the Democratic Party too far left and potentially contributed to the loss. So now that the dust has settled, do you still believe that that helps explain some of the results of the election

Ezra Klein: [00:12:25] Yeah, absolutely. What I would say is that if you are in the broad coalition, we call it the left. Call it the Democratic Party coalition. Call it left. We can describe the sort of diffuse blob of human beings in different ways. I think it is so important to look in the mirror and say, we failed. We failed in every single way it was possible to fail. And in doing so, we allowed authoritarianism to break through containment. And we're in the situation we are in here. It is all easy to talk about all the things Trump is doing wrong. The fact that we did wrong. The fact that the resistance worked and then we held power. And the public turned away from us and gave Trump a form of victory he had never yet enjoyed. That even today the Democratic Party is less popular than Donald Trump is, less popular than JD Vance is. We failed. And I don't exempt myself from that. I do politics. I'm a political opinion journalist. The way I described it in a piece I released over the weekend was, you go back over the last 12 years, and we moved left on immigration, what we told ourselves was we were finally speaking up for those who had not had a voice, that we were representing those who had been unrepresented. So we moved on immigration because we were told that's what Hispanic voters wanted and we lost, like we hemorrhaged votes among Hispanic voters. Moved left on race, lost ground among black voters, left on climate, guns, lost ground among young voters, left on education, lost ground among Asian American voters, left on economics, lost ground among working class voters. The only major group between 2012 and 2024 that we gained ground with were college educated white voters. Was that what we said our politics was about? The argument I'm making here is not an argument that we were not motivated by the right moral intuitions. But politics is a place where at some point, the consequences of your actions come clear. And when they are not what you wanted them to be, you have to change course. You just have to. My view is not that this is all about moderation. I sort of make this whole argument over the weekend that it's about representation. It's about being able to do more things in more places. But to the sort of like the political economy or the digital sociology, I might call it, of your question, I wouldn't call it just the groups. I think the right way to think about it. Is that the digitization, the digitalization of politics created a coherent online professional political class. Created one on the right, it created one on the left. You can even argue it created a couple on the right and a couple of the left. But all of a sudden people who used to be separated by distance, by discipline, by time, were thrown together in the same algorithmic demimonde. And it created a hurting of opinion and a kind of enforcing of opinion structured around the incentives of social media platforms, incentives of conflict, incentives of high engagement, incentives of sort of always pushing to the thing that is still interesting, and that filtered back into the political culture. And our strategy was downstream of that conversation, and it was in every workplace that I know of progressively, like it was everywhere, and it would be fine. If what we had told ourself worked, and it didn't. And so what I'd say is that if you don't feel you do politics, that's fine. But if you do feel you do politics, if you do believe that who is in power, who is wielding power, is important, then the question of whether or not the things you're doing, the things your funding, the kind of things you are organizing seem to be working should be absolutely central. That you cannot ultimately, none of us can ultimately hide from that. Between 2016 and 2024, there have been three national elections. Donald Trump won the first. I think absent the pandemic, he would have won the second. And then after the Biden administration, he decisively won the third. If you believe this is

dangerous, if you believe all the things we were talking about in your first two questions to me, then the question that should obsess you is how is the anti-MAGA coalition appealing enough? How does it become strong enough that it's not always within 200,000 votes in three or four states of losing to Donald Trump and MAGA? Right now, the estimate is that of Republican Hill staffers, 30 to 40%, listen to Nick Fuentes, 30 to 40% are groypers. My view is that should impose an almost unearthly strategic discipline on us. You should see that as so dangerous that there is not margin for loss now. And whatever the answer you come to rigorously is about how to fund and execute unaffected politics, you should follow that. There's a lot of room for disagreement on that. But you cannot hide from that being the question. This is, again, for those of us who think of ourselves as engaged in this political moment, the question of building political power is a consequentialist question. And I don't think any of us can look around who were involved in the moments before this and say, we did a good job, what we did worked. And if you can't say that, then you have to say, okay, where did we fail and how do we have to change?

Grace: [00:18:16] I feel like a fundamental challenge you know, we wanna build good things, we wanna to build for the future. We also want really solid environmental policy. These tensions, I feel, can feel very knotty and how do we untangle? My action here ends up having, my strategy it contributes to a bigger problem, perhaps, is what you're saying.

Ezra Klein: [00:19:08] Yeah, I mean, I wouldn't profess to tell anybody here how to do their job. I am not a funder. I don't run a philanthropy. The thing that I would say is that I engage with many of those groups, and it's not my impression of them that they see that as their job, it is often seemed to me on the democratic side that many of like what get called the groups, they see their sort whole point as pushing the Democrats to the left. Like if that is what you're doing, you're succeeding, your job as an activist is to push the Democratic Party left. And so out come these questionnaires where you try to get Kamala Harris to say that she would do gender reassignment surgery to illegal immigrants like in prisons, right? Why is the ACLU asking her that? Who is it good for if she answers in the affirmative? Not trans people, turned out to be very bad for trans people that she answered in the affirmative. But if you have gotten into a mode, where what you want is for politicians to send costly signals of their ideological commitment to you, then it does seem like a good thing. And you use the competitions of primaries to do that. And I think there are a lot of examples like this. Climate has a lot of these dynamics. To me, what happened in this period, and again, I see it among media I see it in all kinds of places I don't think it's specific to funders is that online politics is highly expressive. It is about what you say. Position taking becomes the ultimate act of politics. But position taking isn't the ultimate active politics. Building the power that allows you to do things is the act of politics, and I think we need to refocus on that question in many cases. Now that may not be the right role for everybody. We could use way better policy analysis than we currently have. I would say policy analysis is much weaker than it was when I came to Washington in 2005. I think more of it is garbage, right? More of it is advocacy-oriented and done at a low quality level, but also just less of it is happening entirely. I think you can look sort of across issue areas and say that the entire system has become less healthy, and I think that's because this system is sort of operating in an online attention economy. Its culture is formed in an online attention economy that is fundamentally an unhealthy economy. When you move things into a more unhealthy culture, everything coming out of that culture is gonna be worse. So to me, there is room right now to sort of make the work of politics honorable again. I think the work activism was seen as honorable, the work organizing was seen as honorable but the work politics began to be seen as dishonorable. I moved to Washington, which I still feel young, but I know I got gray in this beard and it was 20 years ago now. I remember that the overwhelming sense we all had was that members of

Congress were always not quite telling you how they really felt. That most Democrats were more liberal than they let on, for instance. But they had constituents that they were representing and they had to be in attention with that. And the conservatives had their set of problems with this. And nobody feels that to be true anymore. If anything, it's the opposite way. It's actually not, again, and we should talk about this, it's not my view that the way to think about this is the democratic party just needs to move right. But what it does need to do is be very, very internally rigorous and committed to the idea that more people, more kinds of people, in more kinds of places. Need to feel they are represented within it. Not just represented, liked, respected. And that's what got lost. When I talk to the sort of people who Democrats lament losing when I sit in on the focus groups, when I talk to the podcasters that we lamented losing, where is a liberal Joe Rogan? They don't describe to me usually a specific issue. They sometimes will. But what they describe to me overall is a sense that the Democratic party just don't like them. The things they said were no longer OK to say. They were deplorables now. It is a rational act for people to not vote for a political coalition that they feel does not respect them. They are not going to give you power under those conditions. And then you have this other problem, which is that in American politics, power is apportioned by place. We are specifically like that compared even to other peer countries. It's true at the presidential level at the Electoral College. It's true at the House level, and it is very true at the Senate level. A lot of my sort of early career was covering healthcare. I covered the Obamacare very closely. Democrats, when the Affordable Care Act was passed, had Senate seats in Arkansas, in Louisiana, in Missouri, in Montana, in Ohio, in Florida, in Iowa, in North Dakota, in South Dakota, in Nebraska, in Indiana. How many of those states seem in any way plausible pickups for Democrats right now. So it's unthinkable within 15 or so years. If you cannot compete there. So there are 24 states in this country, 24, that Donald Trump won by 10 points or more in 2024. So to have a Senate majority of more than 52 people, you have to win some set of states. Donald Trump one by 10 points or more. States that actually don't like you anymore, right, where a significant portion of the electorate hasn't just given up on you they've embraced your antithesis. The question of what it means to be a coalition that can solve that problem is the question of political power of the time. There's no dodging it and there's no denying it, right? There is no... I keep saying this to people that I feel that for liberals I talk to, it is easier to imagine the end of the American experiment, a collapse into violence, strife, discord than it is to imagine winning a senate seat in Missouri. I think that's wrong. I think you should try to win some senate seats in Missouri, and whatever that means, whatever you have to become, whatever politics you have adopt, you do that. And again, I think it's more complex than moderating on the senate issue. I think it is very fundamentally a question of respect, but that makes it very hard, because if actually the only problem was how to take some positions, they were more moderate on this or that issue that's fairly mechanical, actually. But how do you go to people who just don't feel like that you have an affinity for them anymore and convince them that you do? That requires not just candidate recruitment and funding. That requires a change in a diffuse culture, a culture that politically failed. Now the good news for Democrats right now is that it's not like the right is some politically optimized juggernaut. They are sitting around, debating how tightly to hug Nick Fuentes and a bunch of Pepe the Frog obsessives online. How good, like how much... How old do you need to be for a text message that says, I love Hitler, to not be considered a youthful indiscretion? 20? 26? 30? Because we're getting a lot of those Paul Ingrassia the who was just nominated to be Trump's head of office of special counsel not a small job he had an I love Hitler text message right then you have the young Republican leaders chat right they got leaked to Politico so the right has also become brain poisoned online. And so they have moved into a thing where they're going to alienate a lot of people. So when your opposition is about to alienate a lot of people, you should really think not, how do I also alienate a lot of people? You should think, how am I a

welcoming home for these people? How do I show them that I don't want their repentance I want their alliance?

Phil: [00:27:50] Well, we're talking about right-wing extremism. You got a lot of critique for a piece you wrote in the immediate aftermath of the assassination of Charlie Kirk. You were quite clear that you detested his politics, the racism, the anti-Semitism, you name it. But you also said in a much quoted line that he was practicing politics exactly the right way. Your friend, I gather, from your podcast, Ta-Nehisi Coates, among others, wrote a piece that was critical of your piece. He called Kirk an unreconstructed white supremacist. And said that in the late 19th and much of the 20th century, this country's most storied intellectuals transfigured hate mongers into heroes and ignored their words, just as right now some are ignoring Kirk's. I don't think he was taking aim at you specifically in that. You then had invited him onto your podcast. It was a really fascinating conversation. I'm wondering what you walked away from that conversation thinking. And what you think about the words you chose and the critique you received.

Ezra Klein: [00:29:16] So Ta-Nehisi and I are old friends, we are friends today, we were friends during that show. And we disagree on certain things, right? So let me do this in order, right, the piece about Charlie Kirk, which I wrote in the hours after his murder, I just stand by that piece. I really do understand the reasons people didn't like it, I really do. So I don't begrudge anybody for being mad at me about it. What I said was that there on that stage, that day, Charlie Kirk, whose politics, I think I said in the same line, that I disagree with functionally everything in his politics, that he was out there talking to people who disagree with him, building a politics around that you can use disagreement as a beginning of a political relationship as opposed to the end of it. And the left could actually use more of that energy. And I believe that. That said, the nature of that piece was in a moment of public political violence, a public political murder, where I felt that we, I still feel we might be entering a cycle where violence becomes a much more natural and normal part of our politics. The nature of that piece was to reach out to people on the right and say, I know you are grieving, and for this moment, I can grieve with you. And I think that is part of my, that is how I want to be in politics. I understand if other people don't want to do that, I don't ask it of anybody else. But I don't think the 12 hours after somebody is publicly murdered is your time to tell people, tell the people who are genuinely grieving him everything you thought of his politics. If I wrote a thing about him a week later, I would have written it differently, but I didn't. So in that moment, I was also trying to tell the right that we are not celebrating this. I had gone on X during that. I saw so many people on the left just putting up clips of Kirk's worst moments. I didn't think that was the moment to try to like rip people further apart from each other. I just don't. And again, I understand why other people disagree with that. So then me and Ta-Nehisi's conversation, which I thought was great, but I think if you listen to that conversation, you know, putting again aside the question of like how to respond in the six hours after somebody is murdered on video. We are sort of limbing different roles. And Ta-Nehisi, who's very upfront about this, does not see his role as doing politics. I would say he's much more in an American prophetic tradition. And that is an amazing role. Ta-Nehisi is one of our great modern prophets. I don't mean that in the religious sense, but in the moral sense. But as he says, nobody should run for office saying what he's saying. That if he was there during FDR, he'd be attacking FDR. And I think that there is a, going back to the part you quoted from him, a tendency right now to think of the Civil War period as the dominant, grounding metaphor for our politics. Everybody's reading histories of Reconstruction and David Blight. And I think it's worth questioning whether or not you want to be looking at the Civil War. As the place to really understand who we are as a country. Because the Civil War is a place where, a moment where, the exercise of politics as we typically understand it, right, politics as an alternative

to violence, a way of constructively working through disagreement, fails and we need to move to violence. The bloodiest war in this country's history, the most devastating war we've had, a war we needed to have. I think this is more like the 20th century. I think the analogies we should be thinking of are the Red Scare, McCarthyism, the civil rights movement. There was a chain of political assassinations then, too. And we were able to use politics to work across divide and disagreement to actually make progress to take a country that was fracturing at its very most foundational level and begin to knit parts of it back together. Not, by the way, without there being tremendous discord, agitation, activism, violence, people being beaten in the streets, protestors shot at Kent State, protestors murdered, political leaders assassinated. Hopefully we don't get as bad as we were just in the 60s and 70s, right? That wasn't forever ago. But we were able to use politics to come out of that. And I think if you study how the Red Scare was ended, right, by Dwight Eisenhower, by then JFK in a way, right? Whose brother worked on McCarthy's staff. You know, the people who beat McCarthy weren't, like, I honor the liberals who ran against McCarthy as a fascist. He was fundamentally a fascist. But they did not beat him. They lost to him. He was boxed out of the center by Dwight Eisenhower and then JFK running against the genteel red vader Richard Nixon. And that's how that ended. Or, of course, we could talk about what the political coalitions looked like in the periods in which he passed the Civil Rights Act and the Great Society. I think it is important to reconstruct right now a usable history of political progress, not just a usable history of political failure. And the thing that I find myself obsessed with, the thing I'm trying to do, the thing my piece this weekend is trying to do is say that I think we are still in the range where we can get out of this moment through politics. And as long as I believe we are in that range, I'm going to try to argue for the kinds of political approaches that I think our history shows have worked in times when the divide and the discord was as bad or much worse than it is today. Again, I am not somebody who believes that we have come to the end of the American experiment or facing something we have never faced before. Illiberalism is an old friend in this country. We have been illiberal for much of our history. We had Japanese internment during World War II. Um, we had Jim Crow, right? Like we have been illiberal from our illiberal has been illiberalism has been dominant for long periods. It is not an alien appeal. And so I think we need to take very seriously, not just the genuinely proud and remarkable history of activism that has confronted it, but the also proud and remarkable history of political coalition building that has been able to absorb, weaken, and then marginalize it. And I think Ta-Nehisi is correctly trying to confront people with the amount of sin and hatred and injustice that exists. I feel that one of my roles right now is to, frankly agreeing with him on most issues, but one of my roles right is to try to build a sense of this political tradition too as a useful and capable and muscular response and one that I don't actually think the place we've been failing is the activism. I think the place and the confrontation. I think the place we're failing is the politics in the coalition building. I keep saying this to people. The resistance worked great. Democrats won an overwhelming victory in 2018. They won the 2020 election. It is what happened when Democrats had power again. Power in the White House, power in the Congress, and then cultural power. Power over the big social media platforms, power to sort of set the dominant culture. That is when we turned enough people off of us that we created a coalition that ushered this in. That, to me, is like a failure that needs to be reckoned with, and there is a history too that we can learn about how to have coalitions across the disagreement and divides that exist such that we confront something pretty damn dangerous that has been unleashed.

Grace: Stick around after the break more from our conversation with Ezra Klein.

MIDROLL BREAK

Grace: [00:38:14] I'm curious, from what I took away from that conversation that you had with Ta-Nehisi, a big thread of it, and we've actually heard it at this event as well, again, is this tension of, these are people who want me dead, you know, like not me personally, but like there are people with identities and are pushing for change in which it can seem like we're asking that the representation also include people who fundamentally refute one's identity or the way they show up in the world. Can you talk about that? Because I think that can feel very intractable, but also just super personal.

Ezra Klein: [00:39:02] I think it does feel very personal. I mean... as I said, there's a very strong growing neo-Nazi contingent in American politics. They don't love Ezra Klein, the liberal cosmopolitan elite New York Times columnist. I'm not unfamiliar with the feeling that you're in the crosshairs. But I do think that we have widened too much the boundaries of what that means. Yes, if somebody wants you dead, you probably should not be in a political coalition with them. But that is different than we cannot be in coalition with people with whom we have, say, disagreements that were completely normal for Democrats to have in 2010. And that's, I think, a space where we've allowed a lot of slippage.

Grace: [00:40:03] And not all issues are the ones about where it's about life and death.

Ezra Klein: [00:40:08] So I often hear like I can't talk to somebody who denies my humanity and I think yes if somebody denies your fundamental humanity probably you can't to them but I always want that really well specified right, do they or do they disagree on things that we have disagreements about in this country? I've been in conversations with people recently about should Democrats run pro-life candidates in red states where that would make or red districts where that wouldn't make those candidates more popular and the thing that I've noticed is that the, in some ways the form of the argument I was making wasn't actually that legible. The idea that you would do that because you would be building power to protect choice wasn't obvious, except we all know it when the Republicans do it. Republicans don't want Susan Collins to lose in 2026. They want Susan Collins to win. She's pro-choice, but she votes for John Thune as majority leader. Um... Joe Manchin who was pro-life voted for all of the uh... maybe not all I'd have to go back and look but but voted for the major democratic supreme court nominees Ben Nelson was a deciding vote a pro-life senator from Nebraska was a deciding vote on Obamacare uh... there are forty pro-life democrats in the house when Obamacare passed democrats had to make deals with them but when those disagreements are inside the tent there's actually a lot of trust in other ways you can work together and so you can find the spaces that make everybody feel respected but are fundamentally moving your goals forward. The Democratic Party that lost Roe was the purified Democratic Party, the party that did not have much internal disagreement anymore. The Democratic party that was able to protect it for so many years was big because it contained a lot of internal disagreement. Now, my point is not to center this on reproductive rights. This might be true on immigration, it might be on trans issues, it might be true on climate. But I think we have to be pretty careful and pretty specific with who we are saying we cannot be in fellowship and conversation with. Because if we are knocking out as deplorables 20, 30, 40% of this country, people who believe things that, you know, most Obama voters maybe believed in 2012 then my view, as somebody who believes politics is about the consequentialist act of building power, is that we are about to betray faith, betray the faith of those we need to protect. I did an interview on my show with Sarah McBride, who's the first trans member of Congress. And I think she is brilliant at talking about this. And she always says, tell me when we weren't compromising. Which of the six civil rights acts that we passed was the one that had no compromise in it? She says that there is a culture that has taken hold, that we are throwing

people under the bus. But what throws people under the bus is letting Donald Trump drive the bus, and we're so worried about not causing harm within our own coalition, that we're allowing much more harm to be caused long as it is not us doing it. My view, very simply, is not that we should be giving up on protecting the rights of immigrants, say, but if you go listen to how Hillary Clinton in 2008, Barack Obama in 2012 talked about immigration policy, you hear how much they sought to tell people who were upset about illegal immigration that they understood where they were coming from and their views were gonna be represented in any bill they tried to pass. Then in 2020, there's a debate on the democratic stage. But whether or not to decriminalize the legal border crossing. And every Democrat running for president, with the exception of Bennett and Biden, say they will decriminalize it. So then Biden does become president. It's not an accident that one of the people who didn't raise his hand does. And his administration sort of caught between these cross pressures basically allows a chaotic border. They allow a level of migration that is a record level of immigration in the modern era. Was that good for immigrants? Well, no. Because it weakened the Democratic brand on a crucial issue to people. It was the most, or one of the most effective parts of Trumpism in 2024. One of the hardest to rebut arguments because it just wasn't a good rebuttal. It wasn't an accident that in the debate, famously, it's when they moved to immigration that Kamala Harris begins baiting Trump on unrelated issues because she didn't want Trump to get started on immigration. And that worked in the debates, but it didn't actually work in the campaign. And so now we have ICE being given a budget larger than any military in the world, save the US or China. So did we help immigrants? Did this work? Or did we fail them in a way that they have not been failed by the democratic party in a very long time? My view is the latter, because we failed at politics. And in failing at politics, we failed the people we need to protect. And saying that we understood the people who upset about the level of migration. Saying that we would have a secure border, saying that would find a way to balance the different positions on this in the country. That would not have been betrayal. That would have been keeping faith with those who rely on people in positions of social responsibility and leadership, to go back to that term I was using earlier, who it is their job to balance this and find a forward that is a way forward even if it is not as far and as fast as some of us would like to go. My personal positions on many of these things are way to the left of where I think the country is of even where the current democratic party is. I don't believe that a position that leads to... Donald Trump getting power and Republicans still trusting the right more on immigration. I don't believe that is a position that serves my values. What I'm trying to do is make my values real in the world, not make sure that I never am out of expressive alignment with sort of my ideal world.

Phil: [00:46:48] But let's talk about the relationship between philanthropy and government and your perspectives on how government does and doesn't work. I don't want to caricature anything but I certainly when I started working in philanthropy a couple of decades ago you would often hear this notion that big institutional philanthropy in particular was sort of the seed capital for initiatives that then would be taken up by government and scaled and expanded and there was in that world view a belief in government and in government working and its ability to get things done for people. And one of the interesting arguments that you have made really powerfully in abundance and in your podcast is we need to be honest about the ways in which government isn't working. And I think that's really relevant to folks who work in philanthropy, because almost anybody at a big foundation will say, well, you know, we can't get this done alone, right? Ultimately, to solve whatever problem, there's a role for government. So can you just talk to folks a little bit about the perspective, the argument that you're making in abundance?

Ezra Klein: [00:48:20] Yeah, so I sometimes joke now that I have sort of two projects. One is like a liberalism that likes you, and the other is a liberal system that builds. And we've been talking before this about a liberal that likes you a liberal that more of this country feels has affinity for them, respects them, such that they feel inside of its camp, and they want to be part of its project, right? That inclusive liberalism in a sort of frankly broader version of the term inclusive. Um, a liberalism that builds is just taking seriously what we see around us. In a way, the real end of everything is I'm quite consequentialist. What I care about is whether or not we are getting the things done that we promise, getting the things done that believe. We are here in my home state of California, a place I love. Can I ride high-speed rail from Los Angeles up to San Francisco? Can I go board that all these decades and billions of dollars later? And the answer is no. Can I do it next year? No. Can I do it in five years? Uh-uh. Is there actually any planned date at which I can do it? There is not. We have failed to build enough homes, we have failed to build enough energy, we have failed to build enough infrastructure. And as such, working families have been leaving California, and they're going to Texas, and they are going to Arizona, and they're going to Colorado. And when you are in a state where there is not a single elected statewide Republican, not one, where liberals hold every lever of power that can be held. And what you have done is make a state that is fundamentally unaffordable to the people who you say are at the center of your politics. Then you have to, at some point, rethink something. And to their credit, many of the leading political figures in California are. Gavin Newsom has been signing really excellent housing bills into law this year. Scott Weiner and Buffy Wicks, who have been leaders on housing in the California legislature, have been absolutely heroic on this. I do think that there is a reckoning with these problems, but they're not just California problems. They're New York problems. They're Illinois problems. They're Massachusetts problems. In the places where liberalism governs, it has allowed a set of rules to emerge and structures and processes that have made it very, very hard to build. And by the way, that ends up being true nationally, too. The Biden administration was unusual in that the major accomplishments of bipartisan infrastructure law, the Inflation Reduction Act, were, the Chips and Science Act, were meant to be physical. They weren't building social insurance programs. They were building turbines and solar panels and transmission lines and roads and bridges and trains. And yet we can track how that has been going and I could talk to the people who were doing it, rural broadband, electric vehicle charges, and it wasn't going well. And it wasn't going well because the rules are not set up to build fast. And by the way, that's even true in social insurance programs. When Lyndon Johnson passed Medicare, Medicare cards to use this program that had not existed went out one year after the bill was signed. When the Biden administration and the IRA passed a provision allowing them to negotiate down the prices of 10, just 10 pharmaceuticals in Medicare, the new prices didn't go into effect for three years. 2025, just in time for Donald Trump and the Republicans to take credit for it. The electric vehicle charging network was functionally nowhere by the end of their term. World broadband was functionally nowhere by the end of their term. If you want liberal democracy to be popular, then liberal democracy has to deliver for people. The reason, to the extent there is any one reason, Democrats lost in 2024, is that the country just didn't trust them to bring down the cost of living. And you can say, well, that was inflation. They just happened to have the bad fortune of being in power during a record-setting bout of post-pandemic inflation, and that's true. At the same time, the affordability crisis behind that had been building, particularly in democratic jurisdictions, for a long time. And the projects that Democrats had put into place were not visible by the time they ran for re-election. And it wouldn't have been like that at other times. If we had done the New Deal at this speed, we would have never gotten it out of the Great Depression. We could not do the New Deal today. Harold Meyerson of the American Prospect, where I got my start, but where I'm... less beloved today, has written great pieces on this. You just couldn't do the New Deal under today's

rules and regulations. That's not to say those rules and regulations were misguided, or that they came about for no reason. Life is a pendulum. You solve some problems, and in solving them, you create problems, and then you have a new set of problems, and you need to create a new institutional infrastructure to allow you to deal with them. And so what abundance is trying to do is take seriously where we have failed, and ask, okay, what do we need to do? If you just take the goals of liberalism, of the Democratic Party, my goals, as stated, enough homes that there's affordable housing in places people want to live. Enough clean energy that we can decarbonize this economy and then build a better economy in its place, enough public infrastructure that people trust the government to do big things, enough scientific and medical breakthroughs that we are moving forward on the frontier of progress. And you take seriously how we're doing, which is not that well. Okay, then what do you learn? Like if we want more of all those things, if we wanna choose to have more of those things what do we have to do? And what's maddening about it. You can just look around and see the answer. Texas is installing more clean energy than we are. Not because their politics favor clean energy in a way that California's does not. It's actually the opposite. Texas politics are turning against clean energy. We are expressively so pro-clean energy in California. Texas, like every legislature now is coming up with all these new rules to restrict it. They're still building more than we are because it is easier to build there. Texas builds more housing than we do. Um, when it got expensive here and Californians fled to Austin and Houston, you can just look at how many apartment buildings they built. It went up, not because Texas solved the oligarchy and California did it, didn't, but because Texas just makes it kind of easy to build. I don't want to ape Texas in every respect, but I don't want to be driving working class people out of California to Texas because they allow their superstar cities to respond to new demand for homes for the working class. Like, that's a solved problem. That is simply a choice, a political choice. And, you know, if we believe what we say, we believe we should make a different choice.

Grace: [00:56:00] Can you address, I feel like there are certainly trade-offs, like the high-speed rail, I can imagine, there are endangered animals in the path or there are other causes that are legitimate in their own right. And I'm thinking with this audience too, it's like we measure and we think about the goals that we're pursuing, but it is almost impossible to pull out and have the causation and kind of relationship that you're talking about where well, if I do this and actually it was successful, it has all these like downstream effects that frankly were not my intention. And isn't this just a coordination problem? Can you just talk about that? Because I feel like it just feels like it can be such a difficult thing. So I want to be thoughtful and not have all these second and third order effects that are ruining our democracy. And yet like what I've been given is this process or like this issue area. How do we address that?

Ezra Klein: [00:57:05] So I think this is another good place, I think, for looking at other examples, right? Because I think most of the same people we're talking about would say that European countries do a better job protecting the environment than the American does, that they have a more green politics than we do. But they're also better at building trains than we are. They are better at building a lot of things than we are, which is surprising. And the way they do it is that they empower their bureaucracies to make more decisions and make them faster. It is a distinctive thing about the way America does oversight of government, that we do it through the legal process, that you sue the government, then you go through judges, and then you appeal the ruling, and you go to more judges. And these things stretch on for years. The point is not, I truly believe the point is not that there should not be space for voice, space for communities to have concerns, space for interruption. But that the processes by which these questions are resolved need to be able to ladder up more rapidly to levels of government to which their

job, exactly to what you say, is taking in the needs of society at a broader level. And we have just built systems that don't do that. So Gavin Newsom just signed a series of bills that have to do with the California Environmental Quality Act. And the California Environmental Quality Act is just a fascinating bill, because when it was passed, nobody thought it was a very big deal. It didn't get a single full article in the LA Times when it passed. It was a later lawsuit from a bunch of homeowners in Mammoth, California, where I used to go very occasionally and very poorly snowboarding. Somebody wanted to build a mixed-use housing development and commercial development, they didn't want it. They sued and they were rejected at all the lower levels because what they were saying was the California Environmental Quality Act doesn't allow you to do a development like that without environmental review. And the lower courts are like, what are you talking about? It only applies to public projects. That's not a public project. And the California Supreme Court says, no, no no. Anything that requires a permit is a public project. There's a Sierra Club lobbyist who says, that meant that rubbing two sticks together in California required environmental review. It changed everything. They had to actually pause the bill for months, because it threw every construction project in the state into chaos. So it wasn't actually even intentional in this particular case. And I don't mean to, CEQA is not the root of all evils. And CEQA has been used to do many good things. But we should be very thoughtful about what we are trying to do and trying to not do here. Was CEQA intended to make it so the University of Berkeley cannot build new dorms, because students are an environmental nuisance because of the trash and noise they produce. I mean because it was used for that. Was that what we want CEQA used for? So Newsom signed a bill recently to say that urban infill housing is just CEQA exempt. If it's near transit it's CEQA exempt. I think that makes sense. Building more density around transit at a macro level is not going to endanger endangered species. We know it brings people in from ex-urban areas, the rural wildlife interface that we talk about. We know some things are net-net good for the environment. And so we should make decisions at the higher levels of American politics where these questions are weighed that push in that direction. To the extent that we are protecting the environment with the Environmental Quality Act, we should protect the environment. But to the extent we're not, to the extent we are making it hard to do the things that we know we need to do, build denser homes, build more clean energy, then we should make different decisions. This work of balancing, this work of making trade-offs between competing priorities, there is no dodging it. And I'm not telling you that if you, you know, gave me the wand. Or did it all according to some kind of consideration of abundance, that you wouldn't end up having some new abuses you probably would. We would get new things wrong in new directions. Maybe we would solve problems for a while, and then the next generation could write a book about how, hey, you did a great job solving the problems of the 2020s. But here in the 2050s, we've got to put some guardrails back in. That would be great. Right? Like I don't believe institutional design is a project that you reach some end point with. It's a task that every single generation faces anew. We have institutions designed for the problems of the 70s. We now have the problems of 2020s. We need to design institutions, laws, frameworks, statutes, structures that allow us to solve them.

Grace: [01:05:57] I feel like we're gonna see so many, like you said, cascading effects of people not receiving paychecks, also SNAP benefits being delayed beyond what people can bear. We're really concerned here about civil society and some of us are working on issues that were issues even before this time. I mean, I feel like we are working on some of the most intractable issues and the donors listening to are really caring about those. Are there reasons for hope right now?

Ezra Klein: [01:07:05] I always struggle with the reasons for hope question. There's reasons to act. There's reasons to organize. There's a reason to make good decisions. I consider nihilism, or fatalism, or passivity a sin at this moment. Hope depends on what we do. I mean, yes, I have hope, because I believe there's a lot of room for action. Uh... You know what will happen in midterms is still open to strategic decisions recruiting the campaigns people run uh... I agree that in the sense of the Trump administration turning back on money that's not gonna happen in this administration it is just not uh... Or at least not much of it but i think that what was all this civil society for? If not to help us through a moment like this, right? What were we all doing here? Was it just for the good times? I feel like whenever I read the histories of this sector, the histories of people in my job, it's what groups, what people did when the times were hard that makes it into the history books. It's not what they did when times were flush. Yeah, it was easy under Obama. It was kind of easy under Biden. Being a journalist was easier prior to social media. And so now it's hard and the stakes are really high and we all have to be lean and considered and disciplined. It's harder for the media right now by a lot, right? Much more dangerous for the media right now, by a lot. Most people who went into these jobs that have a texture of social change, that have a promise of being part of moments like this one, went because they were inspired by what people did in previous moments like this one. So I think now it's time to turn to their examples, not our recent experience. We're in a different era, we're in a different regime. We are under different rules, we are facing different dangers and possibilities. And so now we get to see whether we have courage and greatness inside of us or not, right? Whether or not it was to past generations to do the good work and now we just watch it crumble or not. I don't consider that a hopeful answer, but that's the job. If you don't want to do the job, I mean, that's everybody's decision. I mean nobody's forced into, I think it's rare to be conscripted into the non-profit sector. But if you're here, because you care about all this... it's not to say you won't have to make terrible decisions about what staff you're able to keep on, what programs you're able to fund. It's going to be very hard. But this is the moment when it really matters.

Phil: [01:10:50] Why don't we? What I hear from you is a call, not so much for hope, but for determination, and this is a moment that requires it of us. I was telling you before we came out on stage, I listened to an interview you did with Trevor Noah what and I I love the way you talked about your efforts on your podcast to try to, the phrase you used was create a space that allows more than one kind of person in it, and in which people can do their own thinking, that you might push them, they might come out thinking, but that's the goal. And I think you did that here with us and so grateful for you joining us and just want to thank you for spending this time with us, Ezra.

Ezra Klein: [01:11:43] Thank you very much.

[APPLAUSE]

Phil Buchanan: There are a slew of resources about effective giving on the Center for Effective Philanthropies website, cep.org, as well as givingdoneright.org, where you'll find all our episodes and show notes.

Grace Nicolette: You can also send us a note at gdrpodcast@cep.org.

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