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In Obama Era: Can We Think Big and Make the Changes We Really Need?

By Rep. Keith Ellison

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Original source:
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Editor's note: Rep. Keith Ellison delivered this speech to the Momentum Plenary at the America's Future Now conference in Washington.

I've had a few of my progressive friends say to me, "You know Keith, I'm not that happy about the president not really going after those quirks in the Bush administration, I'm not that pleased that we haven't heard as much as we want to hear about a public option. What about 100 percent auction for cap and trade? What about these issues that we care about?"

And I say to my friends, that if the



Rep. Keith Ellison (D- Minn.)

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progressive movement could make Richard Nixon get out of Vietnam and sign the legislation for the Environmental Protection Agency, what can we do with this president? We cannot set our sights low, we should not settle for less, we should not gripe, we should not complain. We should organize, organize, organize!! You thought you were busy before November; you better figure out how to get even busier now, because the opportunity for us to change this thing all around are well within our grasp. The question is: Will we do it?

The fact is, look -- the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. did not wait on Lyndon Baines Johnson to inspire him, did he? He didn't say, "Lyndon, should I march?" He didn't say, "Jack, should I march??" He went out and marched! He also did not say, "I HAVE A COMPLAINT." He said, "I HAVE A DREAM!!" and he marched on that progressive vision, and it absolutely destroyed Jim Crow and eliminated the undemocratic nature of our society at that time.


You and I have to shoot higher than that. We can't shoot at that mark, we've got to shoot above that mark. We've got to be thinking big!

Some of us are talking about, "Hey we've got to get the troops out of Iraq." That's the least we should be doing. That's the bare minimum.

We have to devote time, resource, energy, money and unity to make certain that we have a universal, single-payer system for health care in our country. We have to make the president do it. We have to make the president do it.

Let me tell you – there was a man named A. Phillip Randolph. Who remembers A. Phillip Randolph? And A. Phillip Randolph – before King, before even the great John Lewis, before event the great civil rights leaders – A. Phillip

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Randolph went to Mr. Roosevelt, who was the president at the time, and said, "We're going to lead a march for civil rights in America." And Roosevelt said to him, "Yeah, I believe civil rights are important, we should for sure have some civil rights around here, but you gotta make me do it."

Are you willing to make Obama give us that public option, give us that single-payer system? What about, this: In 9/11/2001, our military budget was about \$294 billion. Today it's about \$690 billion. We have had an explosive growth in the military budget of our country and the militarization of our country.

We have militarized development aid. You can get a sergeant to go put money into building a well before you can get someone from USAID to do it. We have misplaced priorities, and we have got to convert it.

Who will make the case that our military budget is absolutely out of whack, and we've got to demilitarize in America. One of the problems, you and I both know, that if you have a problem, you use the tools that are available to you to solve the problem! Is that right? Because we have relied so heavily on military stuff, whenever we have a problem that is essentially a diplomatic and development problem, we have nothing to rely on other than military stuff, because that all that we've put any time, money and energy into.

It is going to require a massive change from you, from me – and it is going to be a commitment; and the people in this room cannot do it by ourselves, it requires recruiting new people, at every point in our society. And I'm not only talking about young people. I'm talking about people who might be 50, 60, 70 years old and who are ready to get out there and lay it all out on the line for a better America. I'm talking about going to the senior citizens that organize, as well as the grade schools to organize.

You know – years ago, you and I used to talk about people who we called allies – am I right about this? So like, if I care about the rights of the GBLT community, but I'm not of that community, I would be called what? An Ally. And what if I care about the racial justice, and I was a white person, I might say, "Well, I'm not a person of color, but I am an ally."

And you might say to yourself, "You know what, I'm not in a labor union, I'm not a worker, but I care about workers rights, so I'm an ally."

When it comes to the amazing changes we have got to make with regard to creation and this environment that we live in, there are no such thing as allies. If this planet continues to overheat, and the oceans continue to acidify, there ain't no Martians to become our allies folks. You and I have to find a way to come together in a whole new way. Everybody has skin in this game, and we have to make sure that as we begin this argument, because House Energy and Commerce

Committee Chairman [Rep. Henry] Waxman, D-Calif., has put a mark down: He has passed a bill through committee, and we are going to see some climate-change legislation. My question to you is: Will it be progressive legislation that is designed to truly make the conversion away from a carbon economy that we must make in order to save our existence on this planet? Because the planet is going to keep on turning whether we can live on it or not.

This is the issue. If you go up to Alaska – I'm not talking about some country like Norway or Iceland or Greenland or somewhere like that – Alaska, America, your country – what you see now are areas the size of America, east of the Mississippi, where the layers of ice have melted, and there's open water. And whereas before they used to reflect the sun rays, used to reflect off the ice – now they go into the earth and warm it up and release methane gasses, which accelerate this process of global climate change.

The fact is, that whether you are black, white, whether you are Latino, Asian – no matter who you are. Whether you are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, or have no faith at all; this is your problem, this is our problem and you and I cannot let this climate-change debate go by unless we are fully engaged, plugged in and literally shaping the agenda.

We can't aim low. The Employee Free Choice Act, bare minimum. Bare minimum. It's not much to ask for, but until we make it into the law, it's just something we're hoping for. Are we going to bring the pressure we gotta have to get the 60 votes we need to end the debate?

You better believe that the chamber is loaded for bear to stop this effort, for workers to get the rights that they need. Are you loaded for bear? This is the question that I put before you. I'm going to tell you that I trace every single financial and economic problem back to the weakness and fragility of the labor movement since 1957.

If workers were stronger – if workers were stronger, we'd have universal health care already. If workers were stronger, we'd have the rights of gays and lesbians protected. If workers were stronger, we wouldn't have had to pass the Lilly Ledbetter Act a few weeks ago; we'd have been had legislation to make sure that women get paid for equal work; it is only just, and it's only right.

We would have had this stuff done already, but it is because, it is because, it is because our movement lacks muscle and bone density that we're not able to drive the interest that we need, and that means starting with strengthening labor. The Employee Free Choice Act must be made a reality, and all of us have to take personal responsibility in doing it.

Absolutely, we must investigate the criminal wrongdoing of the last administration. How can we do less? How can we do less??

Look – if all of a sudden you get a warm heart and a soft heart for the likes of [former Defense Secretary] Donald Rumsfeld and [ex-Vice President] Dick Cheney, if all of a sudden you all of a sudden get like, "Well, they're gone and done – I guess we don't have to worry about that." I ask you to have some foresight. There might be an administration one day who says, "Well, they did it, why can't I do it?" "They tortured people; I can torture people, too."

In order to see a mark down on what Americans allow as acceptable conduct, you and I have to investigate this wrongdoing, and anybody who doesn't want to have to deal with the administration, needs to be pushed to do it.

If we look back at the founding fathers of this country, like Jefferson, Franklin, people like that, and we say, "Oh man, them old bunch of slave owners..." But let me tell you something, it was progressive to stand up against monarchy in that time. Give them credit, where credit is due. Am I right or wrong??

It was progressive to stand up for a Bill of Rights and insist that it be in the Constitution, saying, we're not going to leave it to chance – that was progressive. It was progressive, even though Jackson said and did a lot of things history should criticize and condemn him for. It was the first time that you had white male universal suffrage. Before that – it was not good enough to be a white man to vote – you couldn't be Catholic and vote, no matter how much money you had or how white your skin was, or how male you happened to be. You had to be a person who was Protestant, wealthy and a white male to cast a vote, and when we changed that, America was better off – not for everybody, but it was better off – and it's important to recognize that.

The Civil War – a progressive movement. It started off – Lincoln didn't want to talk about freeing slaves, but you know what? He had to do it, or he would have lost the war. That was progressive in his day. People like Frederick Douglass made progressive change for America, moving justice down the street, just a little bit more than it was before.

You better believe that when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony started doing the work that they were doing, that they did not see the legislature, the government or the president applauding their efforts. They were hard headed and unreasonable and would not tolerate the status quo.

So remember this, there was a time when progressives who demanded workers rights, like Eugene Debs ended up in jail for talking about the rights of workers, and the futility and complete irrationality of war. And the fact is, is that was a progressive movement.

America has been pushing itself forward; not because of the

Limbaughs of today or the Haywards of yesterday, or the Lester – you know these guys – these old Civil Rights racist guys – you know I'm forgetting their names. Lester Maddox – Lester Maddox didn't move America for it to be in a better place. Did he? No he didn't. Bull Conner didn't make America better – you and the people whose shoulders you stand on made America a better country that it is today. The fact is; we already talked about how MLK was called the most notorious liar in America, by the chief law enforcement officer in the United States – J. Edgar Hoover – and he was called this right after he won the Nobel Peace Prize.

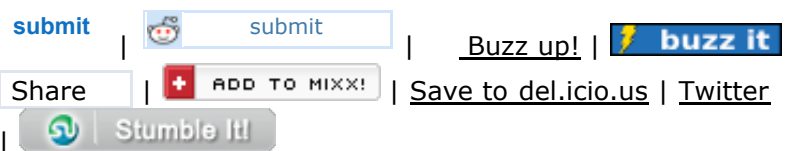
The fact is, you and the people you care about, the people you draw inspiration from, are the ones who stood with Martin Luther King of that day.

But the great things that have happened in America are yet to be done. The future is unwritten. Don't look back nostalgically about who made America better -- you are being called on during this moment, during this time and in this day to bring forth even a better America, and you can do it.

So don't fail, don't shrink, don't back down and don't punk out. Get busy. Get strong.

--Keith Ellison, a Democrat, represents Minnesota's 5th Congressional District.

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