

When did compromise become a 4-letter word?

Written by Wauneta Breeze

Friday, 06 January 2012 20:57 - Last Updated Friday, 06 January 2012 20:59

A Capitol Commentary

By Mary Kay Quinlan

Nebraska political junkies got a new fix this week when Democratic Sen. Ben Nelson announced he would not seek re-election, setting off speculation about who the state's Democrats might find to run for the open seat against a field of well-heeled and long-running Republicans.

One of the possibilities, former Lt. Gov. Kim Robak, was quoted as saying she'd consider running, but that the political divisiveness in Washington, D.C., was a less than attractive feature of the job.

Think about that for a minute.

Robak, like all political figures, no doubt has supporters and detractors. But she is an intelligent, respected Lincoln attorney, and surely is an example of the type of people whose credentials plausibly fit them for public office.

But if the intensely partisan atmosphere in Washington turns off too many such potential candidates, who do we have left to choose from?

Just the people who like to hear themselves talk?

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The people who just like to argue in front of television cameras?

The people who are gifted at crafting sound bites — or hiring staff who can do so?

Current events watchers who pay attention to government, especially at the national level, have been treated in recent months to a seemingly never-ending display of line-in-the-sand partisan standoffs on jobs, taxes, Social Security, spending cuts, you name it.

The rhetoric inevitably features one side or the other adamantly rejecting the mere notion of compromise on the issue du jour.

When did compromise become a four-letter word?

Perhaps our elected officials would do well to return to their local high school's American history class. Most Nebraska youth take it in 11th grade. That's where they learn that our very system of government was born in compromise and is predicated on the notion that people with intensely held views can find common ground.

It was at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia when representatives from Connecticut proposed what became known as the Great Compromise, breaking a deadlock that threatened to derail the entire process.

Under the proposal, each state would be assigned a number of votes in House of Representatives proportional to its population while all states would have an equal voice in the Senate.

The Great Compromise passed by just one vote. But it passed. And the blueprint laid out in 1787 has kept us going for more than two centuries.

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American history is full of such compromises, of greater and lesser magnitude. Indeed, most Nebraskans are familiar with, if not always satisfied with, compromises in all aspects of community — and family — life.

Civic clubs, Scout organizations, student councils, garden clubs, church groups, merchants' associations and all manner of other groups in every Nebraska community survive because their members know how to find compromises on the issues they face.

The ones that refuse to compromise and routinely freeze out people with new ideas eventually wither and lose effectiveness. So why have we allowed political agenda setters to decry compromise when we all know from our firsthand experience that it takes compromise to make things work?

Perhaps if more voters let their elected officials know they care about solutions to problems facing the nation, and not just rhetoric that panders to political extremes, policy makers would be inclined to reconsider the value of compromise and thereby change the nature of discourse on Capitol Hill.

A lot to hope for?

Perhaps.

But if the delegates to the Continental Congress managed to craft a compromise when the formation of a nation was at stake, surely we can expect no less from our 21st century lawmakers — and ourselves.

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