

Creating a Genuine Opportunity Society

Senator Edward M. Kennedy - June 2005

Our progressive vision for America is rooted in the nation's basic ideals of opportunity, fairness, tolerance, and respect for each other.

Throughout our history, the nation's policy at its best has been guided by these values, based on our strong commitment to expanding opportunity, enlarging the number of citizens who share in the country's prosperity, and caring generously for those who do not.

The modern Progressive Era began a century ago, when the federal government challenged the robber barons, setting limits on the concentration of economic power, and establishing minimum standards to protect industrial employees and consumers.

It came of age in the New Deal, fashioning a new social contract setting forth government's responsibility for the economic well-being of its citizens – helping to create an economic climate in which most citizens prosper, and providing a safety net in times of adversity.

It flourished in the post-war era, as exemplified by the GI Bill of Rights, which made it possible for millions of veterans to enter the middle class – helping them obtain an education and purchase a home.

It took on new dimensions in the New Frontier and Great Society, seeking to lift up those trapped in a harsh underclass by prejudice, illness, and intractable poverty. Civil rights laws removed legal obstacles to full equality. Medicare brought good health care to the aged. The war on poverty sought to break down economic barriers.

The results did not work for everyone, but this national commitment to expanding opportunity produced extraordinary progress – moving generations of low-wage men and women, immigrants, and subsistence farmers into the middle-class, where stable jobs enabled parents to build a better life for their children. By any objective measure, these policies were an extraordinary success for America. The nation's wealth soared, and enjoyed far more broadly by a far greater proportion of its people than ever before.

But in the 1980s, the national consensus on policies to expand economic opportunity began to come apart, and income inequality grew. The gap began to close again in the Clinton years, and all Americans gained from the revitalized economy of these years. But today, with the huge new challenge of globalization, good jobs are disappearing overseas, wages are declining, and citizens are struggling desperately to retain their health care and pensions. A survival of the fittest mentality has taken over national policy. The growth in income inequality of recent years will be dwarfed by the greater income gulf we will see in the next 20 years, unless we take action now.

Our vision for the future must include a stronger commitment to the enduring principles that vastly expanded economic opportunity and social justice throughout most of the 20th century. We need an agenda that has the capability to meet and master the challenges of 21st century life, and to restore the American dream for all our people, not just for some.

The Administration and the Republican Congress believe in the concept of an "Ownership Society," but it is based on ensuring only that the wealthiest citizens and corporations share in that ownership, while everyone else falls farther and farther behind.

Hard-working Americans deserve fair opportunities to build assets. They deserve a pay raise, and the security of good health care and a decent retirement. They deserve fair tax laws, and they deserve a chance to build a nest egg, to save money to help their children obtain a good education, and to buy a home of their own. If we invest wisely in these basic principles, we can have an economy that again works for everyone and ensures a fair opportunity for all.

-- Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA) has represented Massachusetts in the United States Senate since 1962. He is now the second most senior member in the Senate.