Introduction

Angus King’s career richly reflects Maine’s long tradition of civic leaders who combine a successful business career with major contributions to public service. In the 1980s and early ’90s, we remember him as host of MaineWatch, a weekly public television program that probed political and policy matters in Augusta and Washington. After the shutdown of Maine State government in 1991 and the hardening of partisanship in Augusta, he ran and won the governorship as an independent, pledging to work for bipartisan solutions to public issues.

In eight years as the State’s Chief Executive, he succeeded in a broad range of areas. His administration oversaw the largest acquisition of conservation easements on private lands of any state in the nation. Maine became a leader in the use of the Internet to provide citizens with new ways to access State agencies for services and assistance. His successful effort to provide laptops for all middle school students placed Maine at the forefront nationally in integrating computers into public school instruction.

During part of this period, the Maine Senate was Republican-controlled while the House was led by Democrats. The two chambers had widely differing ideas about the role of government and, especially, the content of the State budget. Still, Governor King was able to work successfully across party lines. As Michael Michaud, one of the two Senate leaders at that time and now Maine’s 2nd District Congressman said, “Governor King was one who could bring both sides together effectively.”

The message of his time in Augusta seems to have been that centrist, bipartisan coalitions can be fashioned if you believe in them and in government itself. Our hope is that such an understanding will once again take hold in Washington. There is no better qualified person to help achieve this understanding than today’s speaker. It is a distinct privilege to present the junior United States Senator from Maine, Angus S. King, Jr. (K.P)
ANGUS KING: Thank you very much, I am delighted to be here. I’m sure you’re interested in what’s been going on in Washington these last few days, as we struggled to end the federal government shutdown. Well, it has been just weird. I don’t know how to describe it! I was on television this morning and the commentator asked, “What does it feel like?” I said, “I feel like the kid who would hit his head against the wall all day, and then somebody said, ‘Why are you doing that?’” He said, ‘Because it feels so good when I stop.’”

You know, we were sort of celebrating this morning, having kept the government open for three months. We addressed such basic issues as, do we keep the government open, and do we pay our bills—questions that should have taken about fifteen minutes to answer! It’s just inexplicable to me, what we’ve been through; but we did finally get it done last night at ten minutes to midnight. (We all did our book reports on Sunday nights, right?) But this is ridiculous and totally unnecessary.

One of the leaders who helped us get there was our own Senator Susan Collins. I happened to be presiding over the Senate last Saturday—don’t be impressed, that’s a chore for freshmen—when Susan got up and said, “We’ve got to get out of this, and here’s an idea.” She outlined three or four principles, and several of us started to get together to talk. We ended up with 14 Senators—seven Republicans, six Democrats and me. We met off-and-on all last week, and we developed a bipartisan plan.

“Funny, but sometimes during these meetings we would get calls from our respective leaderships, saying, “Quit it, what are you doing? We’ll take care of this.” Then it would all break down on their level, and we would get a call saying, “Keep talking, you’re the only game in town.” On Monday morning we were there, we had an agreement and a very interesting group of people behind it, including Kelly Ayotte (R) and Jeanne Shaheen (D) of New Hampshire. I am very proud that of the 14 Senators, four were from Maine and New Hampshire.

We came to agreement and were within hours of holding a press conference, when the leadership talks just broke down. They just stopped. Then, suddenly, Republican Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and Democratic Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) got back together and crafted the agreement that was voted on last night. It would be an overstatement to say it was identical to our own plan, but it was pretty darn close. I like to think that our work kept the leadership nudging forward.

Ten Comparisons, Then & Now

Let’s talk about Politics Then and Now. It’s fun for me to do this, because I was sworn in as a U.S. Senator 40 years to the day after I went to work as a staff member in the United States Senate, on January 3rd, 1973. So, I have an interesting perspective from having worked for Senator Bill Hathaway of Maine in his 1972 campaign; then gone to work for him in Washington; and now, unexpectedly, finding myself back there 40 years later. I would like to share with you some comparisons between politics then and now.

Money. Bill Hathaway’s campaign in 1972 was the most expensive campaign ever run in Maine to that point, and it cost $212,000. My campaign last year cost $3 million, and it was the cheapest winning campaign in the United States. In fact, a friend from Washington called during the campaign and asked, “What’s your budget?” I said, “Well, about three million dollars,” he replied, “What a quaint number!”

Money has become a huge problem in American politics, huge because there is an insatiable demand for it. My campaign cost three million. There was probably another million and a half or two spent on my behalf by outsiders; and then there was six or seven million spent against me. Do you remember the ads with the little crown on my head? My granddaughter loved those ads. She said, “Look, there’s granddad with a crown on.” She thought it was really cute; she didn’t know they were spending millions of dollars to assassinate my character.

“Today, to run for re-election in a competitive state, the average U.S. Senator needs to raise between $8,000 and $10,000 a day, every day, 365 days a year, for six years! Think for a minute: $10,000 a day, every day, seven days a week! You very quickly run out of friends and family.”

I think we have a good measure of what all that spending was worth. When I ran for governor in 1998, I got 59 percent of the vote; this time I got 53 percent. They spent $6 million on negative ads. I figure they spent a million dollars a percentage point, to take me from 59 to 53 percent. That’s a rough figure for what it was worth. I’m just glad they didn’t spend $50 million!

Here’s the problem. I spent three million, and there was probably ten million spent in total. In Massachusetts, where Elizabeth Warren was running against Scott Brown, the expenditures were $42 million apiece! That’s $42 million on each campaign! Massachusetts has a larger population than Maine’s, but it’s not that much larger. Today, to run for re-election in a competitive state, the average U.S. Senator needs to raise between $8,000 and $10,000 a day, every day, 365 days a year, for six years!

Think for a minute: $10,000 a day, every day, seven days a week! You very quickly run out of friends and family. Where does all that money come from? Unfortunately, it
tends to come from people who are interested in what you are doing. I remember former Congressman Barney Frank saying a few years ago, with typical wit, that, “We have the only political system in the history of the world where perfect strangers are expected to give you large sums of money and not expect anything in return!”

It is a scandal waiting to happen. It’s a real problem, not only in terms of the amounts involved and where you get it; it is also a problem in terms of how much time it takes. I see my colleagues who are up for re-election next year, who are spending hours and hours every day on the telephone, asking for money. On top of this, we have this terrible Citizens United case, where people can give all this money anonymously. It’s one thing if you know where it’s coming from; but now there’s no way to know!

The six or seven million that was spent against me? Nobody knows who gave that money. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce was at the bottom of the “crown” ad, but we don’t know where they got the several million they spent. I believe it was Sen. John McCain of Arizona who said that they had become kind of an identity-laundering organization; and I think that’s a real problem.

In the Citizens United decision, the Supreme Court invited the Congress to require disclosure. The Congress hasn’t done it yet; but it’s something we should do. You cannot go to a Maine town meeting with a bag over your head. You have to say, here’s who I am, here’s what I believe, and here’s who I am contributing to.

We in Maine, in New Mexico, in California, and everywhere, are being battered by these advertisements, without any idea of who’s behind them. There are no limits. It can be a single person with millions and millions of dollars. In 2012, one man backing Newt Gingrich for President wrote a check for well more than ten million dollars – one person! That’s not good for our democracy. So that’s a big difference between politics then and now; $10,000 a day – just think of that!

Half or more of the House districts today have been gerrymandered to the point where they are politically “safe” seats. This means that the primary election in that district is the election. If you win the Republican primary in a Republican-drawn district, you are going to be the Congressman. There’s no contest. The Democrat doesn’t have a prayer, because the lines have been drawn in such a way that it’s going to be 60 or 70 percent Republican, and vice versa. And by the way, there are safe Democratic districts, too.

This means that the person who runs in the primary is vulnerable only to somebody running on their flank. If you’re in a Republican district and running in a Republican primary, there’s always the threat of somebody running who’s going to be more conservative than you; and you’re pushed to the right. By the same token, for the Democrat, you’re being pushed to be more liberal. So, it is the extreme activists who control the primaries; and in many places, unfortunately, not many people vote in the primaries.

Last summer, when I was running in Maine, the Republicans nominated Charlie Summers with just 13 percent of the registered Republican vote. The Democrats nominated Cynthia Dill with just 9 percent of the registered Democratic vote. If you do the math, it’s like one or two percent of the people of Maine who nominated the two major party candidates. The activists in each party tend to control these primaries, particularly if there’s a small turnout. This is what produced this immensely polarized House of Representatives and the government shutdown.

I have heard commentators say, “Well, the Republicans in the House are going to cave-in soon, because the polls for the Republicans are down.” Remember hearing that? “They’re getting hammered, their polling numbers are down.” Then I heard, “Well, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the business community are not going to contribute to the Republicans, and that will shape them up.” No! If you’re from one of those safe Republican districts in Georgia, or Ohio, or Wisconsin, or Tennessee, you don’t care about these national polls. All you care about is your district; and in that district, you were being cheered for closing down the government. That’s what they went there to do!

I talked to one writer who said she had talked to some of the Tea Party Republicans, and the calls from their districts during the shutdown were ten-to-one in favor! Do you see what I mean? It’s why the House didn’t care about the polls. What happens nationally doesn’t really matter, if you’re base is that district. It can work both ways; but right now it’s working more on the Republican side that is so one-sided; and it’s the reason that things have pulled so far apart. It’s why the House didn’t care about the polls.

2 Gerrymandering the U.S. House of Representatives. Gerrymandering is a term that dates back to Gov. Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts in the early 19th century. It refers to the purposeful drawing of election districts to exclude certain voters and include others, so these become “safe” districts for the party in power.
In 1972, when I was 22, one of the most important things in my life was the whirlwind of having these ideological parties. It makes it so hard to solve problems. As we turn out, they did make sense; and now we’re reaping the consequences of starting with a prescription about what to do about it, rather than with a prescription about how to solve the problem? There is no center! There is, of course, our little group of 14; but it is harder and harder to find a center.

I can remember in college, there were political scientists who wrote, “We need more ideologically pure parties; these ‘big tent’ parties just don’t make sense.” It turns out, they did make sense; and now we’re reaping the whirlwind of having these ideological parties. It makes it so hard to solve problems. That is a big change in the last 25 years.

Balkanization of the News Business. When we grew up, we all got our information from essentially one person, Walter Cronkite; or, at most, from a relatively few, national sources. Today there is a news source to fit your biases.... The problem is, we end up living in alternative-reality universes (that) make it virtually impossible to find agreement.

On the other hand, we decided with the New England Governors and the eastern Canadian Premiers to do something about transported mercury pollution. Instead of starting with a prescription about what to do about it, we assigned our environmental commissioners to spend a year quietly studying the problem. Where is the pollution coming from? What is it doing? How bad is it? We established a really good scientific basis, and ended up with a piece of legislation that passed the Maine legislature almost unanimously – because of the facts! We agreed on the facts.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the late and great Senator from New York, once said, “Everyone in America is entitled to their own opinion; but they’re not entitled to their own facts.” One of the problems now is the multiplicity of information sources that create these alternative realities and make it virtually impossible to find agreement. As we go into the upcoming budget negotiation, that is going to be one of our major hurdles.

Social Media. One of the most important things in my campaign last year was Facebook. At the end of the campaign we had something like 45,000 people fol-

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22 See “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System: A Report of the Committee on Political Parties,” American Political Science Review, 44 (3) Supplement, 1950. The controversial majority report of this committee, including the noted authors of two textbooks on political parties, Austin Ranney and Elmer Schattschneider (later president of the ASPA), supported the two party system while asserting that the parties should be reorganized to represent clear differences on fundamental issues, as conservative or liberal. In the wake of the Populist movements early in the century and the deep partisan conflicts of the 1930s, the majority report argued that democracy would better be served through competition on these issues between parties rather than within their internal structure and processes. In the decades following, the parties weakened in virtually all aspects, leading to the present-day system with polarized parties similar to those advocated in the 1950 majority report. The advent of more ideologically coherent parties has made scholars more sensitive to their potentially unhealthy effects in a separated governance system. A program to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the “Responsible Parties” report was held at the 2000 APSA meeting in Washington DC. The proceedings are published under the title, Party Politics: A Century of Change and Continuity, J. C. Green and P. S. Herrnson, eds., APSA Responsible Parties Project, 1950-2000.
loving our Facebook page. For a politician, Facebook is like going door-to-door without having to walk between the houses. It’s an amazing way to connect with people, to have a certain kind of direct communication with them.

I see people all the time who say, “I love your Facebook page, thanks for keeping us up with what’s going on.” It’s the kind of connection that we all crave. Of course, Twitter and texts and those kinds of things are the same: they have changed politics and are making a huge difference. There are specialists in Washington now who do nothing but tell you how to maintain your Facebook page, how to get more viewers, how to get a higher ranking in Google, and all that. By the way, I don’t know about you all, but I feel pretty cool to have been alive at the invention of a new verb, “to google.” Can you imagine telling your grandchildren, “I was there when they invented ‘run’?”

Social media in 1972, when I was working for Bill Hathaway, was calling your mother-in-law and asking, “How’s your grandson?” I was there when they invented ‘run’? That was about it!

Everyone Goes Home. Nobody lives in Washington anymore. When I worked for Bill Hathaway, almost all the senators lived in Washington. Bill Hathaway lived in McLean, his kids went to school there. His wife was there, his family was there, and they hung out. They played golf, they had dinner together, and there was a lot of socializing among the members of Congress. Now that’s almost all gone because everybody goes home. Even my friend Michael Bennett of Colorado goes home every weekend; his wife and kids live in Denver.

Washington clears out, and the work schedule now accommodates this. The work schedule of Congress is generally from Monday afternoon to Thursday evening – which means you can go home Thursday night; stay Friday, Saturday, and Sunday; and come back Monday morning. A lot of the time at home is spent campaigning and fundraising; it’s not just kicking back and relaxing.

The point is, the center of gravity of these folks is away from and not in Washington. This has diminished the kind of personal relationships that are necessary to make a complex organization like the Congress function. One of my friends in Augusta once said, “You can’t hate some-

one if you know the names of their kids.” There is a lot of truth to this. Right now, we don’t much know the names of each other’s kids.

I’m doing my best to crack this. Mary and I have a little place that’s within walking distance of the Capitol. I don’t even have a car, I walk. (And by the way, it’s amazing to turn a corner early in the morning and see the sun rising on the Capitol building, and realize that’s where you’re going to work. It’s stunning and overwhelming and humbling. I probably have 200 pictures of the Capitol on my iPhone, I can’t stop taking pictures of it.)

There’s a rib house two blocks from my house, and in the last few weeks I’ve had seven, eight, or nine senators in for ribs. I don’t have to cook, we just pick up the ribs and go home. We’ve got to try and crack this business of not knowing one another; and all of these people have fascinating stories.

The highlight of my week is often Wednesday morning, the Senate Prayer Breakfast. The reason I like it is, it’s nice to have a little time for a spiritual something; but it’s also the only truly bipartisan event of the week, where Republicans and Democrats are together. We have breakfast together. The Senate Chaplain, retired Admiral Barry Black, gives a prayer, we sing a hymn, we say a prayer, and then one of the senators tells their story. It involves their faith, but it also reveals who they are.

One of the things that has struck me is how many of these people come from unexceptional circumstances; in fact, almost all do. A remarkable number of them come from single parent homes – a disproportionate percentage, it would seem. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina grew up above a bar and pool room owned and run by his parents, both of whom died when he was 19 or 20 years old. He raised his 13-year-old sister and adopted her so she could get benefits and put her through college. Tim Scott of South Carolina had a father who was an alcoholic and died when Tim was 16. Joe Donnelly of Indiana lost his mother when he was ten. His father raised four children.

Someone has asked me, “What are your biggest surprises?” One of my biggest is, these are, mostly, just regular people. (I mean, Jay Rockefeller? Okay; but he’s a wonderful guy.) These are very interesting people. Many of them are wealthy; but virtually all of them, with the exception of Jay and a few others, achieved their wealth on their own, later in life. They weren’t born into it. It’s not some kind of aristocracy, and that’s kind of reassuring; but the problem is, people don’t live in Washington.

The Rise of the Governmental Luddites. Remember the Luddites? They were the people in 19th century England who hated the machines that were taking their jobs, and set about to break them. There is a bunch of people in the Congress today who hate government. Now,
Lyndon Johnson of Texas was and I went to Turkey and Jordan in July, to learn about public service. I mentioned Carl Levin of Michigan. He really bothers me. It’s about that we didn’t face in the 1970s. A significant political force in the country is something always been this undercurrent in the nation; but to have it really bothers me. It’s easy to negotiate with someone if you share the goal of governing effectively, of taking care of the people’s needs, or whatever.

If you are going to buy a car and I’m going to sell my car, you may want the car and I want to sell it; in the question of setting a price, we share a common goal. But if one side has no interest in governing, and really wants the whole thing to fail, that makes it very difficult to govern. It makes it difficult because of the way our Constitution is designed.

Our Constitution has two operating principles that are in constant tension with one another. The one is governing. After a Senate hearing two or three weeks ago, I ran into one of my college history professors, whom I hadn’t seen in 47 years. I asked him, “Larry, is there any precedent for this totally chaotic situation that we’re in now?” He replied, “Of course. It was during the time of the Articles of Confederation,” the period after the Revolution and before the Constitution. It was so chaotic, disorganized, and ineffective that the framers came together to write the Constitution. The Articles of Confederation didn’t create a functioning government; it created the occasion for the Constitution, to govern ourselves.

Then, the framers also said, “Yes, but we’re afraid of government, we don’t want it to abuse us. We’re afraid of concentrated power, so we’re going to create all these checks and balances, and make it very complex and hard to get things done.” These two forces, you see, are always in tension; but if you take the governing part away, it’s really easy to screw up our system. In fact, it’s ridiculously easy to bring it to a grinding halt, if you don’t share the common goal of getting to a conclusion that’s beneficial to the American people.

This is a new development in my experience. I’ve dealt with plenty of conservatives in the Maine legislature and throughout my life; but to say we don’t want government to work, we want it to fail, we want to destroy the government, is a new kind of experience for me.

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When I got back and Mary asked, “What did you think of the Middle East?” I said, “The thing that struck me most is the quality of these young people we have working for us over there, under the most difficult circumstances; and we’re not treating them properly for the incredible contributions they make.” I wish I had a crisper answer, but I really think that may be at the heart of it.

8 Abuse of the Rules. Lyndon Johnson of Texas was Senate Majority Leader from 1954 to 1960. In six and a half years, he dealt with cloture motions on six filibusters. In the last six and a half years, Majority Leader Harry Reid has dealt with cloture motions on 400 filibusters. That’s not right. That is just not the way the system was designed to work. Of course, the way the Senate filibuster rule works is, you have to have 60 votes to break it.

To give you an idea of how this has changed, I was on the floor one day and listened to Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, who’s a very smart guy, with an amazing family history. His father was born in Cuba and went into the mountains at the age of 14 to fight with Castro’s army. He was captured by the dictator Batista, was tortured and put in jail; he escaped from Cuba, went to Texas, raised a family, and was Ted Cruz’s dad. Anyway, Ted Cruz said something – without any sense of irony – and I remember sitting there being shocked by it. He said, “This amendment should be subject to the normal 60-vote requirement.” It’s not a “normal” 60-vote requirement! It wasn’t “normal” for more than 200 years; it’s been “normal” for just the past five or six years.

When I came in January, there were 46 Senators who had been in the Senate for six years or less. Does this surprise you? You think of the U.S. Senate as a place where people go and stay forever; almost half, with six years or less. One of the problems with the filibuster is
that these people all think this is the way it’s supposed to be, you know. Not doing anything is the norm, because that’s been the way it is! I went in as a firebrand, saying “Let’s change that filibuster rule.” I was ready to vote for it with Majority Leader Harry Reid back in January. I’m probably still there, but I’m less enthusiastic than I was before. We could spend a month writing a filibuster rule; but if people want to abuse the system, they’re still going to do so.

For example, there’s a rule in the Senate that every bill has to be read aloud. Typically, what happens is the bill gets called up, the clerk reads the first two or three lines, and some member says, “I ask for unanimous consent that we waive the reading of the bill.” The presiding officer rules, “Without objection, so ordered.” But if one Senator objected, all we would do is read bills. It would take hours or days to read a several hundred page bill; and there are all kinds of other things that could gum up the works.

The point I’m making is, it’s more about attitude than it is about the rules. It’s more about institutional respect than it is about the rules. We may end up changing the rules, but I’m not sure that’s going to be the answer. Some of the old, stalwart Democrats are very against changing the rules. Carl Levin of Michigan and Barbara Boxer of California, who were there when the Democrats were in the minority, have said, “Oh, no! We don’t really want to do this. What if you have a Republican President, Senate, and House, and they decide to privatize Social Security? We would like to be in a position to slow that train down.” So they were very passionate. Carl Levin of Michigan, who is a wonderful guy and unfortunately retiring, was very passionate. He said, “Be careful, because you change the rules and then they can be changed on you. You may regret it.”

What really worries me is the attempt by a portion of the House to gain results that they can’t gain through elections, by using the government as a hostage. I’ve been criticized for using that word, but I don’t know what else to say when somebody takes something, and insists, “I won’t give it back until you give me what I want.” I was very much against using the shutdown and the debt ceiling to change the Affordable Care Act. The way to change the Affordable Care Act is to elect Republicans to the Senate and elect a Republican President, not use the system to make laws in a way that’s not in the Constitution.

It’s an extra-constitutional way of changing the laws that I find very, very troubling. It’s why the President and Harry Reid were so resistant to what was going on. If this had been successful, it would have become the norm, just like the 60 vote majority. It would have been, “We’ll just do this every six months or so, and we’ll get what we want.” Particularly when you’re talking about a group for whom a shutdown is a success. It’s a very dangerous situation, and it is not the way our system is supposed to work.

If you go to a little book, “How a Bill Becomes a Law,”23 nowhere does it say, “If all else fails, take the government hostage and then you can get your law.” It’s not there. You’re supposed to win elections. In effect, what we just went through was an attempt to nullify the 2012 election; and I think that’s anti-democratic. That’s why I am so concerned about it.

9 The Real Issue. The budget fight is not really about the budget, the debt, and the deficits. There is a deeper discussion going on, and it’s really about how big should the federal government be, what should it do, how much it should take in taxes, and how much should it spend; and this is an age-old discussion. It’s about the size and scope of the federal government. That is really what is at stake here. You’re going to hear a lot of talk in the next 60 days about deficits and unsustainable debt and that kind of thing, and that is important; but you should know that there is a deeper discussion going on here about how big the federal government should be. And it is an age-old discussion.

I’ve gone back and looked at our history, and found that we’ve had this argument nine different times since 1787. The most famous, of course, was the Civil War. We fought over the question of what is the proper role of the federal government, and what is the role of the states? It’s a legitimate question; if we’ve had it eight or nine times, it’s clearly a live question that should be discussed. That is what is going on in this budget debate.

And the real debt and deficit issue is healthcare costs. That’s what is driving the debt, that’s what’s driving the deficits. If you look out into the future, it is the whole deal. What we call “domestic discretionary spending” – not Social Security and Medicare, but all the other things we think of – Pell Grants, National Parks, the EPA, the FDA, farm programs, and all those kind of things – is down as a percentage of the GDP, the gross domestic product. It is now about 3 percent, the lowest it’s been in 40 or 50 years. Defense spending goes up and down when we have wars; it’s now around 5 percent and relatively flat.

When you look at the federal budget, the items that are doing damage are Medicare, Medicaid, and medical costs for federal employees and retired veterans. This is where the cost is, where the deficits are out into the future. My view is, we need to talk about this problem more generally, and not just in the context of the government. We need to talk about how to lower healthcare costs across all of society, for everybody.

Right now we have the highest per capita healthcare costs in the world, and we’re 17th in the world in terms of results. It’s inexcusable. We spend now 17 or 18 percent of GNP on healthcare; in Maine it is 20 percent. This means that one in every five dollars spent in Maine is spent on healthcare, and our results aren’t competitive with the rest of the world. This is a whole different way to talk about healthcare, but it means changing the way we pay for it and what the incentives are.

10 Two to Tango. The only way anything gets done in Washington is with both parties. It is simple arithmetic, and you would be amazed how few people get this. The Republicans in the House think they run the place. The Democrats in the Senate think they run the place. The President thinks he runs the place. But, if you have a Democratic President, a Republican House, and a Democratic Senate – with rules such that the Republican minority has enormous power – you can just do the math.

In order to do anything, it’s got to be bipartisan – or as I’m training them to say, nonpartisan. Occasionally they say tripartisan when they see me in the room. This means that we are stymied if one party tries to assert the answer to all the questions. It just can’t happen. What I am trying to do is to work with Susan Collins’ working group as I did with last summer’s working group on student loans. I had a very heated meeting with the Democratic Caucus on the student loan issue, because they wanted to hold out, to have their plan and nothing else! I got up in front of them and said, “Yes, but you don’t have the votes! If we’re going to do this, we need Republican votes.”

We put together a coalition involving Republicans and Democrats, built out from the center, and ended up passing a bill in the Senate and in the House, and the President signed it. This would never have happened if both sides had held to their iron-clad positions.

By the way, it’s no coincidence that four of the six senators who did the student loan deal are former governors. I was talking with Mitch McConnell, the Republican Leader, about this and he said, “Well, I have found that if you ask a former governor who’s now a senator which job they like better, and they say senator, they will lie to you about other things, too!” (Laughter)

Well, as I hope you can tell, I’m a person who is curious, who likes public policy, and who likes to try and fix things. I’m having a great time in the Senate, and I want to thank all of you for giving me this unbelievable opportunity to work for you and for the people of the country.

What we did over the last couple of days is by no means a dramatic answer to everything. It may be just a sliver of hope that budget negotiations may work. It’s going to be very hard to solve the budget, because the two sides are very far apart; but I’m hoping that people now realize that nobody can get it all, that it has to involve compromise.

Yes, compromise. This United States government was built on compromise. The United States Senate was created as a result of a compromise at the Constitutional Convention, and that’s the way we have to make it work.

Thank you so much.

Q & A

Question: What concerns me is the effect of sequestration on Section 8 housing vouchers, because I know many people need a place to live. Do you have any comment on that?

KING: Sequestration is an arbitrary, across-the-board cut in spending. It affects everything. It’s not thoughtful, it was designed to be stupid, and it is. It was designed to be so bad that nobody would ever contemplate letting it go into effect; and, of course, it went into effect. It has affected Section 8.

“We could spend a month writing a filibuster rule; but if people want to abuse the system, they’re still going to do so.... The point I’m making is, it’s more about attitude than it is about the rules. It’s more about institutional respect than it is about the rules. ”

This budget negotiation we’re about to begin is going to be a lot about sequestration – how to manage it, how to allow more flexibility, how to try to ameliorate the impacts to the cuts. That’s going to be very tough, because now the Republican members view sequestration as the base, the law. That’s what we’re going to have to deal with, in the next two months.

Question: Can anything be done about the gerrymandering? Neither party wants to change it. And it is very undemocratic, when one considers that a candidate gets elected to the House and has to become more and more conservative to stay elected. How can we eliminate gerrymandering?
KING: I had hoped we could pass a law, as it’s a really serious problem, number two on my list. Unfortunately, it turns out to be a state-by-state matter; and if you’ve got a state that’s solidity in the hands of one party or the other, they’re not likely to let go of this power. California has done it. When he was Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger got through a referendum that created a non-partisan commission to do it on a scientific basis; and my impression is that it’s worked pretty well; however, I don’t think the Supreme Court will get involved.

Question: I had something to ask, but the gentleman before me got to the question. So thank you for coming, and I’ll let the next person go.

KING: Thank you. You would never make it in Congress, because once a Congressman or Senator gets to the microphone, they will find something to say! Thank you. (Laughter)

Question: Thank you for speaking up as strongly as you have for the importance of health insurance in people’s lives. You were quoted in the New York Times as saying it’s immoral to encourage people not to sign up for health insurance. My question is about the issue of campaign finance reform: what can we as citizens do in terms of getting some movement on that?

“The budget fight is not really about the budget. There is a deeper discussion going on, and it’s really about how big should the federal government be, what should it do, how much it should take in taxes, and how much should it spend.”

KING: On health insurance, here’s my story. When I worked for Senator Hathaway I had health insurance and went for a routine checkup because it covered annual checkups. I hadn’t had a checkup in nine years. They found that I had a malignant melanoma. It’s a disease that you either get operated on right away and you’re okay, or you don’t and you’re gone. I’m here only because I had health insurance, so I feel personally passionate about this. I can’t figure out how it’s fair for me to be here while some other person, who didn’t have that health insurance and get the checkup, died. Nine thousand people a year die of melanoma. Between 25,000 and 45,000 people a year die in the U.S. simply because they don’t have insurance. Often they put off treatment until it’s too late.

On campaign finance reform, this will have to be a national movement. Call your cousins and uncles and aunts in other states. I think everyone in the Maine delegation is okay on this issue. The problem is, the parties are always asking, “Will it benefit me and help my party, or will it help the other party?” You never know when it’s going to work one way or the other. The one thing we can do, although it’s not going to be easy, is disclosure, so at least people know where all this money is coming from.

Right now you can’t give more than $2,500 to a federal candidate. The Supreme Court is hearing a case right now and there’s an even chance that they will declare that limit unconstitutional, and say people can give whatever they want.” That is not what our country was designed to do. The idea that money equals speech, I’m just not sure about; but that’s what the Supreme Court has held. Keep active on the issue.

Question: I, too, am very concerned and disturbed by the corrupting influence of campaign finance. The system we have today can be best characterized as a legalized mixture of bribery and extortion. What can we do? Is there a solution short of a constitutional amendment?

KING: I doubt it. I think it’s going to take a Constitutional amendment, because Citizens United is based on a reading of the First Amendment. I don’t believe it’s a correct reading, but that’s now the law. The Supreme Court decided it, and it’s going to take a constitutional amendment to change it. This is a very tricky thing, a constitutional amendment; you’ve got to be very sure about how you write it. I don’t know how the current case is going to come out, but if they rule that there can be no limits whatever on contributions, it will be a very deleterious decision.

Question: I’m a student at USM, a junior majoring in communications with a minor in economics. I just want to know how you would feel about a more socialist society, like a lot of countries in Europe have; and if you think that would be a good fit for our society.

KING: Do you think I’m going to come out four-square for socialism? I’m brave, but I’m not stupid. “Socialism” is often bandied about, without talking about what it really means. My impression growing up was that socialism meant the government owned the means of production — the steel mills, railroads, car companies, all of that. Nobody is advocating that. I don’t think Social Security is socialism. Social Security is social insurance: we all pay in and we all take out. It’s the same with Medicare.

We want to be humane and take care of people who, for whatever reason, are disadvantaged in life. At the same time, we have to be constantly vigilant about not creating an entitlement society, where people are given incentives not to work and produce. That’s the tension. The debate isn’t helped — and this isn’t directed towards you, person-

Note: See McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission. On April 2, 2014, by a 5-4 vote the U.S. Supreme Court struck down aggregate limits on contributions to candidates, as Sen. King had feared.
ally – by using the term, “socialism.” I think it’s misused. The term I would use is, “caring.”

**Question:** What about Sweden, then, where they have education paid for; healthcare paid for; they have all this stuff paid for; and it’s equal – everyone gets it. Unlike America, where if you don’t make enough money, you can’t get health insurance, you can’t go to college?

**KING:** That is why I supported the Affordable Care Act, which is really much simpler than it has been portrayed. It contains some needed insurance reforms: you can’t deny people because of pre-existing conditions; you leave your kids on their parents’ policy until they are 26; you can’t discriminate against women because they’re women. Then it creates this marketplace for buying private insurance. You can’t go and “sign up” for ObamaCare, itself; it doesn’t exist! You go to the private marketplace – once they get the website working, and don’t get me started on that – and you buy from Aetna, or Blue Cross, or whoever. It is a private enterprise kind of solution. I’m sort of amazed by the violent reaction that it’s somehow “socialism.”

The issue of the personal mandate – everybody has to buy it – well, that’s the kissing cousin to the ‘no pre-existing condition’ exclusion. You can’t eliminate pre-existing condition requirements and not have a personal mandate. Otherwise, none of us would buy insurance until we found ourselves in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. It would be like being able to buy fire insurance when you see the flames on your roof.

We in Maine have had mandatory insurance for automobiles for some 40 years. Nobody thinks much about it; it’s a matter of personal responsibility. We need to give the Affordable Care Act a chance, and I think it’s going to make a real difference in people’s lives.

**Question:** Since the 1970s, we’ve had an enormous increase in economic inequality in this country. The average income of a white male has actually declined and practically all of the increase in gross domestic product per capita has gone to a very thin sliver at the top. With the Supreme Court’s decisions on money and politics, this thin sliver seems to have even more influence in what goes on, and in the long-run this clearly is not sustainable. We don’t want a violent revolution. How do we get out of this dilemma?

**KING:** This concerns me because the numbers verify exactly what you have said. I’m not a redistributionist, I don’t think that’s the answer, but I think the government shouldn’t aggravate the problem. The tax system and the way our programs are funded ought to be fair and equitable; and I believe in the progressive income tax.

Yes, I worry about it. This is a little bit of an exaggeration, but we don’t want to become a country of gated communities. We don’t want to become a country where the wealthy are behind barbed wire and everybody else is outside. I worry about violence. A man from out-of-state, who was starting a new business in Maine, once visited me in Augusta and wanted to know where Maine’s gated communities were. I told him the only one I knew of was in Thomaston.

I wish I had an answer to your question. The best answer is probably investment in education so that everybody has a chance. You know the old saying, “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” In the future it’s going to be, “the educated get richer and the uneducated get poorer.” Education is the opportunity.

**Question:** The executive branch proposes a budget and the Congress approves a budget. Why do we have a debt ceiling at all, and how can it be gotten rid of? No other developed country in the world has a debt ceiling.

**KING:** It is an anomaly, provided for in a statute that was passed 1916, I believe. It isn’t in the Constitution. In fact, in the 14th Amendment to the Constitution says, “The debt of the United States shall never be questioned.”

I have been thinking of introducing legislation to automatically extend the debt ceiling when a spending bill passes, because there’s a terrible misunderstanding about the debt ceiling. When most people hear “the debt ceiling,” they think, “Well, if we raise it, the government is just going to spend more money.” The debt ceiling is what allows us to pay the bills we’ve already incurred. It’s exactly like, at the end of the month, saying, “I’m not going to pay my credit card bill. I’ve gone out and spent a lot of money, but I’m not going to pay it.” That’s exactly what we just went through.

“**This United States government was built on compromise. The United States Senate was created as a result of a compromise at the Constitutional Convention, and that’s the way we have to make it work. ”**

What bothers me is that, the way the system works now, a politician can vote for the spending – “I want a new highway in my state” – and then six months or a year later say, “I’m against raising the debt ceiling.” They have it both ways, you see. It ought to be, when you vote for the spending, there’s a clause that says, “And the debt ceiling is raised in order to accommodate the spending we voted for.” I’m told that was the rule in Congress for
some period of time. To use the debt ceiling to achieve an unrelated end is puzzling to me. The shutdown we just went through cost $24 billion to our economy, and it was done in the name of saving money!

**Question:** When you were working with Senator Hathaway, Senator Muskie was the senior senator. From what you saw then, has working with senior leadership changed from what it was then?

**KING:** Senator Collins is my senior, and I’ve got to tell you, she is terrific. I always liked her and respected her. I knew she was tenacious. I now serve on the Intelligence Committee with her, and I’ve seen her mind work. She’s really smart, well-balanced, and she has guts. It took guts for her to put this non-partisan group together, to try and work out this budget matter. She took flak from her leadership, from other people, and she did it. I always liked her, but my esteem for her has only grown from working with her. She’s really an able senator and we’re fortunate to have her.

**Question:** My concern is Social Security. Why would any Democrat, including the President, be willing to consider messing with it, when we need to get Wall Street and the financiers, “the banksters,” to return money to the Treasury?

**KING:** I can’t speak for the President; but the only reason to discuss Social Security is to be sure it remains sound. It’s not contributing to the deficit, you are enjoying it, I’m hoping to enjoy it, and we want to be sure our grandchildren enjoy it. In 1982, it was fixed for about 50 years. We’re now coming to the end of that time, and there may be some modifications needed. Social Security is not in serious financial trouble. Medicare is, because the cost of medical care has escalated so fast; but Social Security can be fixed with three or four not terribly dramatic changes.

One is that the Social Security tax now stops at $113,000. If you make over $113,000, you pay the Social Security tax on the first $113,000, after that you pay zero tax. Changing that could help. Similarly, raising the retirement age – some 30 or 40 years from now, way out into future – could help. The only reason to do anything with Social Security is to be sure it is actuarially sound for the long term.

**Question:** Given the State of Maine’s recent refusal to accept Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act, do you think Medicaid should continue to be implemented by the states, individually, or should it be more of a federal program?

**KING:** Well, it is federal. It’s funded two-thirds by the federal government, and there are federal regulations governing its administration. The states administer it, and as a former governor, I’m OK with that. Now, an individual governor or legislature may make decisions that we don’t agree with; but I’m not sure all wisdom resides in Washington; after the last nine months there, I have to wonder about that. That’s the dilemma, and I’m reasonably comfortable with leaving many of these decisions to the states.

**Question:** I’m a farmer, and as a farmer, there’s not a whole lot of power or money in my profession. I would love to hear from you about the role of integrity and accountability in Washington, and how you maintain the values that I hear you talk about.

**KING:** It is a question of values. Why does one do what I’m doing? You do it because you think you can make a bit of a difference in peoples’ lives. I thought long and hard about whether to run for public office again. I was pretty happily retired, teaching, building windmills, and having some fun. It changed my life utterly to do this; but ultimately, here’s how I decided to do it. I can tell you the exact moment.

Mary and I decided that, after our daughter went off to college, we would go RV’ing again, and travel the country. Then I began to think about running for the Senate and what a drastic change that would make in my life. How do I make this decision? It finally came to me, how will I feel ten years from now, looking back, and answering this question: “You might have made a difference for the country – and you decided to go RV’ing?” Once I put the question that way, the answer was obvious. And here I am.

Thank you all, very much. (Applause)