

HUFFPOST POLITICS

Empathy Deficit Disorder

Robert Reich: 10/28/2014

Commenting on a recent student suicide at an Alaska high school, Alaska's Republican Congressman Don Young said suicide didn't exist in Alaska before "government largesse" gave residents an entitlement mentality.

"When people had to work and had to provide and had to keep warm by putting participation in cutting wood and catching the fish and killing the animals, we didn't have the suicide problem," he said. Government handouts tell people "you are not worth anything but you are going to get something for nothing."

Alaska has the highest rate of suicide per capita in America -- almost twice the national average, and a leading cause of death in Alaska for young people ages 15 to 24 -- but I doubt it's because Alaskans lead excessively easy lives.

Every time I visit Alaska I'm struck by how hard people there have to work to make ends meet. The state is the last American frontier, where people seem more self-reliant than anywhere in the lower forty eight.

It's true that every Alaskan receives an annual dividend from a portion of state oil revenues (this year it will be almost \$2,000 per person), but research shows no correlation between the amount of the dividend from year to year and the suicide rate.

Suicide is a terrible tragedy for those driven to it and for their loved ones. What possessed Congressman Young to turn it into a political football?

Young has since apologized for his remark. Or, more accurately, his office has apologized. "Congressman Young did not mean to upset anyone with his well-intentioned message," says a news release from his congressional office, "and in light of the tragic events affecting the Wasilla High School community, he should have taken a much more sensitive approach."

Well-intentioned? More sensitive approach?

Young's comment would be offensive regardless of who uttered it. That he's a member of the United States Congress -- Alaska's sole representative in the House -- makes it downright alarming.

You might expect someone who's in the business of representing others to have a bit more empathy. In fact, you'd think empathy would be the minimum qualification to hold public office in a democracy.

Sadly, Young is hardly alone. A remarkable number of people who are supposed to be devoting their lives to representing others seem clueless about how their constituents actually live and what they need.

Last week New Jersey Governor Chris Christie grouched to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, "I'm tired of hearing about the minimum wage."

No doubt some in the audience shared Christie's view. It was the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, after all.

But many of the Governor's constituents are not tired of hearing about the minimum wage. They depend on it.

New Jersey has among the largest number of working poor in America. Some 50,000 people work for the state's minimum wage of \$8.50 an hour.

This isn't nearly enough to lift them out of poverty. The state's cost of living is one of the five highest of all states.

In any event, doesn't hearing from constituents about what they need go with the job of representing them?

Christie went on to tell his audience "I don't think there's a mother or a father sitting around the kitchen table tonight in America saying, 'You know, honey, if our son or daughter could just make a higher minimum wage, my God, all of our dreams would be realized.' Is that what parents aspire to?"

A minimum-wage job is no one's version of the American dream. But Christie is wrong to suppose most minimum-wage workers are teenagers. Most are adults who are major breadwinners for their families.

Christie seems to suffer the same ailment that afflicts Alaska's Don Young.

Call it Empathy Deficit Disorder. Some Democrats have it, but the disorder seems especially widespread among Republicans.

These politicians have no idea what people who are hard up in America are going through.

Most Americans aren't suicidal, and most don't work at the minimum wage. But many are deeply anxious about their jobs and panicked about how they're going to pay next month's bills.

Almost two-thirds of working Americans are living paycheck to paycheck.

And they're worried sick about whether their kids will ever make it.

They need leaders who understand their plight instead of denying it.

They deserve politicians who want to fix it rather than blame it on those who have to depend on public assistance, or who need a higher minimum wage, in order to get by.

At the very least, they need leaders who empathize with what they're going through, not those with Empathy Deficit Disorder.
