

Franken says have-have not gap widening

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.

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Nearing the end of his first term in office, US Sen. Al Franken said the road to progress is long and the gap between the haves and have nots is widening.

Franken made the comments during a one-on-one sit down with *Insight News* following the annual Minneapolis MLK Holiday Breakfast, honoring the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. According to the junior senator from Minnesota, though progress has been made, King's dream is far from being realized.

"As much progress that has been made, we haven't gotten anywhere near the Promised Land (King) talked about," said Franken. "We take two steps forward and one step back always it seems. The disparities in income and employment and educational achievement and in incarceration – we haven't seen equality. We still have a lot of work to do."

According to Franken, we need look no further than the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling to overturn Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and efforts in the state of Minnesota and other states to restrict voting to demonstrate that King's dream of equality has yet to be realized.

"Right on the heels of that states like Texas and North Carolina did everything they could to pass new laws to suppress minority voters," said Franken.

Though Minnesota was not a state monitored under Section 4 for infringing African-American

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voting, a proposed state amendment to tighten voting fell to defeat in 2012.

In addition to ensuring African-Americans maintain their rights to the democratic process; Franken said greater efforts are needed in public education – particularly in Minnesota. But the senator does see signs of hope.

"The Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ), to me, is the right approach," said Franken, referring to the cradle to college approach of educating children in a geographic area of north Minneapolis. "What Geoffrey Canada did in Harlem (with his Harlem Children's Zone) is a great model. The model of early childhood, meaning prenatal care through early career is the model we need to follow."

Franken said statistics bare out his assertion that the NAZ approach is the best way to end the achievement gap between whites and students of color. To that end, he lauded the federal dollars that have been used to support the program.

"We know that if you do early childhood education that the children who benefit from it are less likely to be special ed (education), less likely to be left back a grade, they have better healthcare outcomes; they graduate at higher rates from high school, they have higher rates of going to college, they get better jobs and pay more taxes and they go to prison less."

The senator said it's up to the federal government to make college more accessible and affordable for lower income students – many of whom are students of color.

First elected to the Senate in 2008 – the same historic election that gave the nation its first African-American president – Franken said he was stunned at the level of dysfunction and obstructionism directed to the president from some members of the far right of the Republican Party.

"In 2010 a certain faction of the Republican Party won a lot of seats and since then they have been determined to undermine the government at every turn," said Franken.

And while Franken said some of the obstruction is pure partisan politics, he acknowledged race might play a role in the Washington gridlock.

"I wonder to what extent race is animating this," said Franken. "Bill Clinton encountered a great deal of hostility ... I mean he was impeached, so I want to give people a little credit and say this is not about race, but on the other hand (race) has an animating aspect to it. The continued belief that (President Obama) isn't an American is ridiculous. But if you look at the polling of the 2012 primary in South Carolina and Mississippi you saw a healthy chunk believing he wasn't an American – I mean come on now, really?"

Franken said much of the fight in the nation is not race based but between the haves and have nots with Supreme Court rulings saying corporations are people. The senator has introduced a bill to amend the Constitution to overturn the ruling, but he acknowledged that is a long shot. Franken said because the ruling was a 5 – 4 decision, if there is a change to the court another lawsuit could come up that would overturn the previous decision.

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"I'm very invested in the things that will make it easier for all Americans to live the middleclass life that is the American Dream," said Franken.