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Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

Keynote Address of Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin

Vision 2020

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Thank you. I'm delighted to be here and proud to represent all of you who care so deeply about our children and their future. I want to especially thank the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, the Wisconsin Head Start Association, and the Wisconsin Community Action Program Association for joining forces in this effort to end child poverty by the year 2020.

The three founding organizations have done much work to identify and develop the policies that we need in place to effectively end child poverty. However, as we all know, children in poverty don't have high paid lobbyists. And unless we speak for them, they are voiceless.

You are actively seeking remedies that guarantee that no one in Wisconsin is denied a healthy economic future. But this is not only about economics.

Child poverty is not new. Long before the current economic crisis, we struggled with the problem and with the disparities in our society that allow it to continue. Poverty is not always related to the availability of jobs. Chronic poverty has existed in good times and in bad, but it does not have to be that way.

There are those who believe that individual responsibility trumps all ... that we must pull ourselves up by our bootstraps ... that it is up to each of us to succeed in the world and that we are all equally able to do that. We have seen much of that mentality in the policies and practices of the current administration.

Thankfully, a majority of Americans believe it is time for a change.

I think we agree. This is the meaning of the "common good," written into the Constitution "in order to form a more perfect union," "to promote the general welfare," "for ourselves and our posterity." That's why we're here today - to fulfill the promise of America.

This is no easy task.

This year, with a waiver from the federal government, Wisconsin enhanced BadgerCare – creating BadgerCare Plus to ensure that all Wisconsin children, and now many adults, living in poverty can have health insurance. This is a milestone in our effort to ensure health care for all.

And yet, just weeks ago, a national report revealed that our state, once the third healthiest in the country, now ranks 17th. In 1990, our state ranked ninth best for the number of children living in poverty. Today it ranks 25th.

Does this mean all your efforts have been for naught? NO. But it does mean, we must maintain our focus, recommit our efforts, and understand that we are engaged not in a simple project, but in a movement.

Being part of a “movement” does not guarantee that we will always be moving forward ... just that we will always be moving ... never standing still, making do, or lulling ourselves into satisfaction with anything less than our stated goal.

Being a part of a “movement” means that sometimes we will be forced to take a step backward, before we take two, three or four steps forward.

As a casual student of movements, I’m inspired by learning of the Suffragists and the Abolitionists of the 19th century and the Freedom Riders, the Stonewall demonstrators, and the Earth Day environmentalists of the second half of the 20th century. And I know that our quest for health care-for-all is a movement and that in order to achieve this goal, we must create the national will to make it so.

We must create the national will to eliminate child poverty. It won’t happen overnight – or simply because we want it. We must make it happen.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to join Congressman John Lewis on a Congressional Pilgrimage to Montgomery and Selma, Alabama to observe the 40th anniversary of the Voting Rights March and the 50th anniversary of the Montgomery bus boycott.

It was an amazing experience. I got a chance to sit in the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where Martin Luther King, Jr. was pastor and in the “Brick a Day” First Baptist Church of Montgomery where Ralph Abernathy was pastor. (It was named Brick a Day because that is how the church was built . . . with congregants donating bricks, one at a time, toward its construction.) I sat in those churches and heard from the leaders of the movement at the time.

One of them, Dorothy Cotton, led a citizenship training program. She would recruit participants, many of whom were illiterate, and, almost all of whom were poor, with the goal of training them about their rights as citizens and how to exercise them. They would start off with a discussion of citizenship and, ultimately, rights.

It wouldn’t take long to get into a discussion of the Constitution. She’d read the preamble “We the people of the United States in order to form a more perfect union” and people’s chests would begin to puff out a little. She’d read the Bill of Rights . . . the first amendment . . . the fourteenth. She’d watch the transformation before her very eyes.

People would start to talk about what they could do to, as she put it, to “fix what ain’t right” in their communities.

Learning about the struggle for voting rights, and the larger movement for civil rights, in America, I was struck by the faith that the people of Selma and Montgomery had that their actions would produce change . . . a faith that, if they used the tools of our democracy, they could effect change; even when it was their government that was denying them their rights.

Great movements of change are not spontaneous. Each involves citizenship training, grassroots organizing, advocacy and, most important, a belief that each of us can make a difference, and a faith that our democracy provides us with those tools. This is the reason we’re here today and the purpose of Vision 2020.

I get exhausted when I think about how long some changes have taken. I get exhilarated when I think about how rapidly other changes have come about. I ask myself, how many of the changes that I want to see . . . and work to see . . . will I see in my lifetime?

But we must not limit our dreams to what we’ll achieve in our lifetime, nor should we limit our determination.

In each of my offices there’s a framed poster with the words of anthropologist Margaret Mead who researched human behavior in society. Mead observed, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has!”

You are that small group of thoughtful, committed citizens. You are the voice of our most vulnerable. You are empowered to change our world and end child poverty . . . and I salute you!

Thank you.