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News

In 75th year, experts discuss future of Social Security

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The celebration was on a Saturday in August at Hyde Park, home of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, architect of Social Security.

Ken Apfel, Social Security Administration commissioner, told reporters that Roosevelt considered the program the cornerstone of his presidency. FDR envisioned it as something that would eliminate the blight of poverty from the lives of elderly Americans, allowing them to maintain their dignity and independence.

Apfel called it the “most successful domestic program in our nation’s history ... part of the fabric of American society.”

That was a decade ago during a celebration of the 65th anniversary of Social Security. Now 10 years later on this Labor Day — the legal holiday honoring America’s working people — that fabric is in danger of becoming unraveled.

Not only is the program in trouble financially it has also become a political football. Former Republican Sen. Alan Simpson co-chairs the White House’s fiscal commission — a panel selected by President Barack Obama to advise what should be done to preserve this venerable program. In his usual caustic manner Simpson compared Social Security to “a cow with 310 million teats” and Social Security as a bloated program for spoiled old people. He later apologized. But critics have contended that most governmental commissions are set up to defuse debates while not actually accomplishing anything.

Could be. Obama’s commission is scheduled to report Dec. 1.

The stark fact is that Social Security in its 75th year is in financial straits and in danger of going broke. According to David C. John of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, Social Security owes \$7.7 trillion more in benefits than it will receive in taxes, and never-ending deficits will eat up money that could be used for other programs and tax cuts.

The general consensus is there are three ways to save Social Security: 1) reduce benefits, 2) increase retirement age, or 3) raise taxes. James A. Dorn of the Cato Institute responding to the war cry of New Hampshire Republican Sen. Judd Gregg, argues that the framers of the Constitution would never have imagined a welfare state and this kind of “forced intergenerational redistribution.”

Remarks like Gregg’s stick in the craw of labor leaders like Connecticut AFL-CIO President John Olsen.

“Retirement security was always thought to be like a three legged stool — one leg of the stool was a defined pension plan, another leg was personal savings and the third was Social Security,” Olsen said. “Now that defined pension plans are under attack and personal savings are being wiped out with the economic crisis, Social Security is more important than ever.”

Olsen reminds us that the program was enacted 75 years ago to lift seniors out of poverty.

"It's insane to think about destroying this safety net," he said. "If it were not for Social Security, 45 percent of older Americans would have incomes below the poverty line."

State Sen. Donald DeFronzo, D-New Britain, agrees.

"The experience of the Great Depression convinced Roosevelt that the utter poverty of older Americans and the disabled could not be tolerated," said DeFronzo. "Today, Social Security is experiencing financial problems but the program needs to be saved."

Barbara Kennelly, president/CEO of the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare, said as we celebrate Social Security's 75th birthday this Labor Day we need to remember the real-life impact the program has had on millions of Americans.

"Only one-half of today's work force has a retirement plan of any kind," Kennelly said. "Traditional pension plans have virtually disappeared for the recession generation and the homes many planned to use as a nest egg for retirement have plummeted in value. In spite of this, Social Security has been a stable and secure source of income for millions who desperately need it."

To Kennelly, cutting Social Security is not an option.

Still, how do you answer critics who argue that in five years revenues will be insufficient to pay full benefits and that the program is bankrupt? If you are a labor leader like Sal Luciano, executive director of New Britain-based AFSCME Council 4, you respond with determination.

"From its inception, there have been those who have promised that Social Security would destroy the country," said Luciano. "Instead, it has saved millions from poverty and has allowed many people to grow old with some measure of dignity."

Leo Canty, a veteran union organizer, produced and hosted the award-winning "Connecticut at Work," labor's only TV show in the state. He is also president of the American Federation of Teachers Communications Association.

Canty said telling people they're going to have to work longer, and harder and get less when — or if — they retire is a sign of the erosion of the infrastructure that has traditionally supported working families. Ross Eisenberry of the Economic Policy Institute echoes Canty's sentiment. He said the biggest financial problem facing Social Security is the rise in the inequality of income, something that can't be resolved by raising the retirement age.

In 1983, 10 percent of all earnings were above the taxable earnings cap. Today it's at 16 percent. This leaves high earners with a windfall and Social Security with a shortfall. "If those earnings were brought back under the cap and taxed, about 40 percent of the Social Security funding shortfall would disappear," Eisenberry said.

Canty said people like to talk about "the good old days." Well, we may be returning to those good old days when three generations of one family lived together and jobless sons and daughters moved back in with their parents.

Social Security will run as long as there's a political will to keep it running.

"We need to apply the pressure, but where and at whose expense — the rich or the working poor?" Canty said.

U.S. Rep. Chris Murphy, D-5th District, has been talking to voters in his district about issues that matter to them. He said when he's at senior night at the McDonald's on West Main Street, New Britain, he hears from people who remember what life was like for their parents and grandparents before Social Security.

"It wasn't pretty," said Murphy. "Americans were forced to work until they died or live out their retirement in deplorable poverty. Social Security's and Medicare's track records of virtually eliminating elderly poverty in America must continue for those working in New Britain's factories and small businesses, and their kids and grandkids. The stakes are high; some people want to privatize Social Security. For this reason, those of us who support Social Security have to be vigilant to protect it."

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