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EDITORIAL: Reid and the jobless

Is Angle really so 'extreme'?

It was only five weeks ago that GOP Senate hopeful Sharron Angle was subjected to a public flogging for being "insensitive" to the unemployed.

Not only did Ms. Angle say she would have opposed a July Senate bill extending federal unemployment benefits to 99 weeks, she also said that some recipients of jobless benefits were part of a "spoiled" culture of entitlement.

Her Democratic opponent, unpopular Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, jumped all over the comments, as did his many stenographers in the local punditry class. Ms. Angle apologized for using the word "spoiled."

But the potential damage continues.

On Tuesday, the Reid camp unveiled its latest TV hit piece on the challenger, trotting out the "spoiled" quote to continue the theme that Sharron Angle is "too extreme" for Nevada on economic policy.

Ms. Angle's comment is obviously fair game. The candidate has nobody but herself to blame for her choice of words.

But if Sen. Reid really wants a debate over Ms. Angle's view on unemployment insurance, he'd better be careful what he asks for.

On Monday, Robert Barro, an economics professor at Harvard, penned a commentary for The Wall Street Journal headlined, "The folly of subsidizing unemployment." Mr. Barro notes that "it is reasonable during a recession to adopt a more generous unemployment insurance program," but that extending payments to almost two years is unprecedented and has created a "welfare program that resembles those in many Western European countries."

In fact, Mr. Barro argues that the high percentage of long-term unemployed today -- a number higher than any time since World War II -- is a direct result of this generous benefit extension. "My calculations suggest," he writes, "that the jobless rate could be as low as 6.8 percent instead of 9.5 percent if jobless benefits hadn't been extended to 99 weeks."

Mr. Barro's essay appeared just a few weeks after Jeffrey Miron, director of undergraduate studies in the department of economics at Harvard, noted in a TV interview that extended benefits serve as an incentive for some workers to be more selective and thus to stay on unemployment "for extra weeks or months ... for a little bit longer."

Nor does Mr. Miron buy the argument that unemployment benefits stimulate the economy, noting

that the checks are generated by taxpayers who no longer have that money to spend themselves. Compassion for the unemployed is fine, Mr. Miron argues, but, "At what point do we say we have to put aside compassion and worry about efficiency and worry about giving people stronger incentive to go back to work, even if it's not the job they'd most prefer?"

It may shock progressives to learn this, but such sentiments are not "extreme," they are solidly in the mainstream of economic theory. Maybe Ms. Angle isn't such a dangerous radical after all to suggest that extending unemployment payments in perpetuity can be counterproductive and create more dependency.

Meanwhile, we have little doubt Sen. Reid is a friend of the unemployed. That's why he and his bosses in the Obama administration have been working furiously over the past 20 months to create so many of them with their high-tax, big government, job-killing agenda.

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