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Why Senator Moynihan Is a Rare Breed

United States Senators can define their jobs any way they want. There are some so content with the title "senator" that they merely participate in ceremonial events and overseas junkets. Others become glorified city council members, acting as advocates for their constituents by helping them cope with governmental regulations, supporting "friendly" legislation, and bringing federal funds back home. Finally, there are a few senators who take the time to learn about public issues and persuade their colleagues to pass laws that actually affect our lives. Daniel Patrick Moynihan is one of the rare U.S. senators who thrives by doing all these things.

And Moynihan is an educator, a teacher who considers the Senate hearing room and the nation his classroom. At recent hearings on welfare reform, Moynihan - who has an instinct for using provocative language to explain complex issues - suggested that a biologist who looked at the recent surge in teenage pregnancy might wind up "talking about 'speciation.'" Naturally enough, Moynihan's language drew more attention than his effort to improve our understanding of teenage pregnancy. Some critics felt that Moynihan was implying that a new genetic pool was being created by pregnant teenagers - many of whom are minorities. The attacks on Moynihan have been so severe that they've succeeded in diverting public attention from the fourfold increase in teenage pregnancy, from 92,000 in 1960 to 368,000 in 1991.

The rise in teenage pregnancy transcends racial boundaries; in fact, the rate of births to single teens is growing faster among whites than African Americans. According to a report issued by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, from 1980 to 1989 the percent of births to single black teens declined, from 22.7 percent to 21.1 percent, while the rate of births among white teenagers rose, from 4.5 percent to 5.9 percent.

While there are many causes of teenage pregnancy, including the younger age at which teenagers have sex, the limited economic opportunities for youths, a more tolerant climate for single teenage mothers, as well as the bizarre incentives of the current welfare system, there is no doubt that unwed teenage mothers and their offspring have bleak prospects for economic success. The General Accounting Office reports that 42 percent of all women receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) are now, or have been, teenage mothers. Moreover, almost 80 percent of the children of unwed teenage mothers live in poverty.

The collapse of the labor market for young workers has aggravated the problems facing teenage parents. The Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress has noted that, from 1979 to 1992, the percentage of full-time workers age 18 to 24 who earned less than the poverty level more than doubled, from 23 percent to 47 percent. For teenage fathers who would like to support their new families, the good-paying jobs have vanished. In 1979, 15 percent of full-time

male workers without a high school degree earned less than the poverty level; in 1992, that figure doubled to 32.2 percent.

For more than 30 years, Daniel Patrick Moynihan has been consistently ahead of the curve in highlighting issues before they become serious national problems. During the Kennedy administration, he tried to focus public attention on the conditions of the black family and was criticized for doing so. During the Nixon administration, Moynihan pushed for an overhaul of the welfare system long before it was fashionable. In the 1980s, Moynihan was the first senator to recognize that the true legacy of the Reagan deficits would be long-term constraints on future domestic spending. And now his metaphor about the implications of teenage pregnancy has ignited an outburst of criticism by people who care more about the senator's hyperbole than about the crisis of children having children.

Maybe a senator who takes risks by trying to get people to think deserves special protection and treatment so that he doesn't become an endangered species.

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