

Times have changed since Labrador's day

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Every Idahoan takes pride in the biography of its youngest congressman.

Born to a single mother in Puerto Rico, Raul Labrador moved to the mainland, worked hard, got himself a good education and became a lawyer. After serving two terms in the Idaho House, he was elected to Idaho's 1st Congressional District in 2010.

Such a compelling story brought Labrador to "Meet the Press" Sunday, his sixth appearance on that program. The occasion was the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial.

But Labrador used that occasion and his own personal story to deny a harsh reality in American life. For people at the bottom of the economic ladder, the American Dream is dying.

Who says so?

The Brookings Institution, for one. Earlier this year, it noted income inequality was rising and social mobility - the ability to rise above one's station in life - was rapidly slowing.

The Pew Charitable Trusts, for another. Its Economic Mobility Project found 65 percent of Americans born into poverty stay there.

Several studies have highlighted how America's poor have a smaller chance of escaping their circumstances than do the impoverished citizens of Denmark, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, France, Germany and Japan.

And the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago reported that the ability of Americans to climb the economic ladder was greater from 1950 to 1980 and has declined ever since.

There's no mystery involved. The culprits stopping people from getting ahead are low-quality elementary and high schools, high levels of poverty concentrated within neighborhoods, single parenthood, social isolation and the widening gap between rich and poor.

Not that this is a historical anomaly. Social mobility ebbs and flows throughout American history. But for three generations, Americans made a commitment toward giving people a hand up. The New Deal of the 1930s provided Social Security and greater collective bargaining rights for organized labor. After World War II, the GI Bill of Rights opened college doors and home ownership to the Greatest Generation. The Great Society of the 1960s and 1970s yielded a meaningful minimum wage, college grants, affirmative action and early childhood education.

A good deal of that effort has atrophied in the years since Ronald Reagan declared this was not the proper role of government.

"The fact that studies are showing now that people born in poverty are likely to be trapped in poverty belies the whole idea of what America was founded on," biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin said on Sunday's telecast. "The idea that if you come here, you use your talents, you work hard, you'll have a more generous life for you and your children. We have to make a national commitment again."

Comments like that provoked Labrador, who segued from King's speech to his own story and then this: "The rhetoric that (King) used, the words he used and the message that he had used was the message of hope. And unfortunately, what I've been hearing from your panelists is not a message of hope. It's a message of despair. And I think we need our leadership to actually be more hopeful."

There's always room for hope. But it shouldn't overwhelm facts. And the fact is that Labrador, who was born in 1967, had an easier time getting ahead because the United States was committed toward enhancing social mobility during the the time he was growing up.

That is not the experience many poor children enjoy today.

If Labrador doesn't know that, he needs to find out - however much it confronts his Tea Party preconceptions. - M.T.