

http://info.msnbc.com/_news/2012/02/29/10541107-transcript-andrea-mitchells-exclusive-interview-with-sen-olympia-snowe?lite

Transcript: Andrea Mitchell's exclusive interview with Sen. Olympia Snowe

Wed Feb 29, 2012 1:57 PM EST

In her first television interview **since announcing her retirement from Congress, Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-Maine)** discussed her decision today on "**Andrea Mitchell Reports.**" Here's the video and transcript of the interview.

VIDEO

[TRANSCRIPT]

ANDREA MITCHELL, MSNBC HOST: And again, that shock that was sent through Capitol Hill when Chris broke the story last night. The three-term Maine senator Olympia Snowe surprising her own party leaders, announcing she is not going to run for re-election. A departure that takes one more lawmaker willing to reach across the aisle out of the political equation and also immediately, as you said, led the smart money to predict that Democrats have a good shot at holding on to the Senate.

Senator Snowe now joins us -- now, for her first interview. Senator, first of all, why have you decided not to seek re-election for a fourth term?

OLYMPIA SNOWE (R), MAINE: Well, Andrea, it was a very difficult decision, to say the least. But I decided during the recess -- you know, having a milestone birthday helps you to focus and to be clarifying, about whether or not I was prepared to commit to another six years in the United States Senate. And particularly in the context of the times that we are in in the Senate, where it's very, very difficult to resolve major issues that are so important to the future of this country and how best could I serve, and to make voice heard.

And I made the decision not to run for re-election of the Senate and to pursue other opportunities outside the Senate that perhaps I can give voice to the frustrations that you know, exist with the political system here in Washington, where it's dysfunctional. And the political paralysis has overtaken the environment to the detriment to the good of the country.

MITCHELL: Do you think that both parties, including your own, contribute to this dysfunction?

SNOWE: Oh, absolutely. Everyone has to stand back and understand what is the essence of public

service? It's all about solving problems. What are our obligations to the country and to the people we represent? It's the coming up with effective solutions, sitting down and working with the issues. Sitting around table and sorting through the differences.

You can never solve a problem without talking to people with whom you disagree. The United States Senate is predicated and based on consensus building. That was certainly the vision of the founding fathers. And if we abandon that approach, then we do it at the expense of the country and the issues that we need to address to put us back on track.

MITCHELL: You have been a critical vote, reaching across the aisle, for stimulus and for these -- keeping health care alive, not final passage, but keeping health care alive, getting it to the floor. You said, at the time, I think "Is this the bill, all that I would want? Far from it. Is it all that it can be? No. But when history calls, history calls."

Then by December 2009, you ended up opposing the bill as did every other Republican, believing that Harry Reid was rushing you all. And Reid then, I think, angered you by telling "The New York Times" that it was a waste of time dealing with you. What did you learn from those experiences, those critical showdowns with your own party and the opposition?

SNOWE: Well, you know, it's become an all-or-nothing proposition, and in the instance of the health care bill that became law, the problem is, you know, much of that was actually crafted behind closed doors. We never had the opportunity to have an open amendment process as I was actually promised so that we could truly have bipartisanship and develop a more practical, more pragmatic approach to the issue of health care. But that was all, you know, jettisoned until we got the amendments in the final hours before Christmas for up-or-down votes.

And that's not what the Senate is all about. The Senate is trying to bring people together to the extent possible to reasonably resolve issues that are so important to the American people. I always recall my first years in the Senate. And it happened that Bob Dole was the Senate majority leader. And I can always hear his words, they ring in my ear. Even though there were differences, and we had some key issues, he would say -- he would put a group together. It would either be Republicans or Republicans and Democrats, whatever the case may be. He said go in my office at 8:30 in the morning and work it out. He would always say, work it out.

And that's the point. We are not working out issues anymore. We are working on a parallel universe, with competing proposals, up or down votes. And you know, as the "National Journal" said recently, we're coming close to a parliamentary system. Well, that's not how the Senate was designed. That's not how our founding fathers envisioned the United States Senate and the overall Congress.

MITCHELL: What do you think of Senator Roy Blunt's proposal on contraception, some of the gender wars that have been fought out on the Senate floor?

SNOWE: Well, it's interesting we are having the who debate on contraception and you know, what should constitute coverage and what kind of role does the federal government play because I know I was involved in the issue more than a decade ago. And I did support a conscience clause, and I was drafting one in the

process. We never got to consider the legislation. So, I do think it's important.

I think with respect to the Blunt amendment, I think it's much broader than I could support. I think we should focus on the issue of contraceptives and whether or not it should be included in a health insurance plan, and what requirements there should be. And I've supported the Marco Rubio approach in that regard.

I do think there should be a valid conscience clause, and I didn't agree with what President Obama had done with respect to that mandatory requirement.

MITCHELL: In this Republican contest, in light of your comments about the way things are played out in the Senate, what do you think of some of the rhetoric that we have heard, the snob comments by Senator Senatorum, some of the rhetoric that comes from Mitt Romney -- from all sides? Both political parties. Is there a Republican that you are now prepared to endorse whom you would like to see be president of the United States?

SNOWE: Well, I'm not going to make endorsement right here. But let me say that. I think ultimately, whether it's within our party, or across the aisle, ultimately, here in this Senate, we have to work together. Within our party, hopefully we can move forward in a united fashion. We are stronger united than we are divided. That is for sure.

And that, frankly, for our party, it's understanding that you have to have tolerance for all philosophical views. You know, it was the big tent. That is something that even President Reagan, you know, adopted and incorporated on the letters -- let us focus on the issues where we agree, on 80 percent of the issues as opposed to focusing on those areas which could represent 20 percent where we disagree. And I think that that is true. And I think that is going to be important for us in supporting a presidential candidate if we want to win the election.

MITCHELL: Senator, we have known each other a long time, and I have watched your career a long time. In making this decision, your personal history must come into play. You were orphaned at age nine, you were widowed at age 26. Your husband, Governor McKiernan's son, died at age 20. You have suffered incredible losses.

In passing what you think is a milestone birthday, how do you assess the next career, the next decade for Olympia Snowe or decades for Olympia Snowe in light of all the struggles that you have endured in life?

SNOW: Well, you know, I've been gratified in light of the struggles and hardships that I have experienced, I've have had the opportunity to serve my constituents, with an understanding and an empathy. We don't have to share, you know, the same set backs to understand the depths of pain that one can experience.

So, I brought that to bear in my profession, hopefully, and that the people of Maine have felt that.

Secondly, in looking forward, I'm going to be, you know, this is a new chapter in my life. I decided that if I was going to do something different, it had to be at this moment in time. So, I'm going to be giving my voice to what should change here in the United States Senate, and in Congress, to get things done for the American people.

I have traveled the country, Andrea in recent months. I've talked to thousands of people and given many

speeches. And I have to tell you that, including my state of Maine, people are deeply frustrated. Yes, they are facing personal financial pains and hardships. But more, about the fact that we are not getting things done here in Congress so that they can look to the political leaders and institutions to solve the problems that they are facing in their daily lives at this unprecedented moment in American history.

So, I hope I can give voice to that in a different way, outside of the United States Senate, chamber.

MITCHELL: Senator, I know had you your differences with the White House from time to time, you know what the president did say. Issuing a statement last night saying that your career shows what can be accomplished, "how much can be accomplished when leaders from both sides of the aisle reach across the aisle from both parties, reach across the aisle and try to do the right thing for the America people."

And we just want to -- let me personally say I want thank you for your service, which continues of course as you complete your term.

SNOWE: Thank you. Thank you, Andrea. And I sure appreciate it.

MITCHELL: I wish you all the luck in the world as you tackle your next adventures. Thanks to you, Senator Snowe.

END