

## The Washington Post

### A senator sees a ‘five-alarm fire’ A conversation with Sen. Angus King (I-Maine).’ April 4, 2025

King is one of two independents in the Senate — both of whom caucus with Democrats — the other being the more outspoken Sen. **Bernie Sanders** from Vermont. But King is increasingly speaking up about President **Donald Trump**’s aggressive efforts to concentrate power in the executive branch, something King told us was a “five-alarm fire.”

It’s an issue that flared anew this week with Trump [announcing a minimum 10 percent tariff](#) on all imports. On the same day of his announcement, four Republicans in the Senate [joined Democrats](#) in an effort to undo the president’s previous tariffs on Canada. And yesterday, a bipartisan pair of senators [introduced legislation](#) to reassert congressional authority over tariffs and require lawmakers’ approval after 60 days.

- “I think it’s overdue,” King told us yesterday evening. “Congress made a decision some time ago that in an emergency situation, the president should have the power to enact a tariff in ... a war or something like that. But the problem is this president is defining emergency as whatever he thinks it is. There’s no emergency. ... What Congress needs to do is pull that power back.”

Still, he wants to see Congress do more to stand up to the executive. We spoke with him about his concerns earlier this week.

#### **Before we get into the issues of the day, what’s it like being an independent in the Senate in 2025?**

Well, it’s kind of a luxury because I don’t have to worry about a primary and I don’t have to worry about some group or another that supports the party and whether or not I’m going to offend them. ... If you had to put my political philosophy on a bumper sticker, it would be, “I call them as I see them.” And I think that’s an advantage. And it also allows me to work with people on the left, the right, Republicans, Democrats. My only goal is to get things done and to try to protect the country.

#### **You’ve [said](#) we’re in a constitutional crisis right now. What concerns you the most?**

The first point is to try to step back from the daily deluge of information ... and take a longer view of what’s actually going on in terms of our constitutional structure. And that’s where I think we’ve got a five-alarm fire. What we’re seeing is a fundamental

restructuring of the way our government was designed that basically is moving more and more power to the executive, to the point of rendering Congress almost an afterthought. It's happening in multiple ways. The collapse of an entire agency, USAID. The Department of Education. These were created by statute, and the executive has no authority whatsoever to eliminate a statutorily created agency. If they don't like the agency, come to Congress and pass a bill to eliminate it. The same thing goes with the impoundment of funds.

This is dangerous stuff, and ... I don't like a lot of things the administration is doing in terms of policy, but this structural collapse of our system where power is basically being given to one person — I don't care if it's the Archangel Gabriel — it's dangerous, and that's the moment that we're in.

**Do you feel your colleagues in the Democratic caucus fully understand the urgency of this moment, as you see it?**

I think most of them are getting it. Again, it's very hard — I'm not disparaging anybody — but it's very hard to focus on this broader problem when the daily actions are so damaging and dangerous.

I divide what's going on into ... two categories. One is ... a question of competence, and the other is danger. And the dangerous part is the constitutional part we've been talking about.

**I know you're disillusioned about Republicans, but do you see any glimmers of hope among them? Four Senate Republicans crossed over to support the resolution to undo Trump's tariffs on Canada.**

I'm not going to name anybody, but I think there are members of the Republican caucus who are growing increasingly uncomfortable with what's going on, both in terms of what I mentioned — the constitutional part — but also, you know, what Elon Musk [and the U.S. DOGE Service are] doing. I mean, attacking the National Park Service, attacking Social Security, attacking veterans — I think, after [[Tuesday night's special elections](#)], the Republicans are coming to realize that this is not a good electoral strategy.

**Do you think their concerns are more political than substantive?**

I think some of them do understand and share the constitutional concerns, but I think a lot of them, again, after [Tuesday] night, are going to realize that they've got some real political problems. And the other thing — there are three levels of guardrails of our constitutional system. One is the Congress itself, and right now the Congress is failing in protecting itself. ... The second guardrail is the courts, and they are largely stepping up,

but we're at the earlier stages of the testing of this, and we don't know where the Supreme Court will go on some of these fundamental issues. But the final guardrail is the people.

We don't have elections for 18 months, and the question is, "How much damage to our constitutional system ... is going to be done between now and those midterm elections?" But ultimately ... people are engaged, and we're seeing it in demonstrations. The most common question I get from people in Maine is, "What can I do?"

### **How do you respond?**

I encourage them to stay engaged. Members of Congress are, in fact, responsive to their constituents. And when you get thousands of phone calls and thousands of emails, it has an effect. And I think members have been surprised, and I think it's only going to accelerate because the negative effects of a lot of what they're doing right now is not going to manifest itself for weeks or months.

### **You've alluded to DOGE. How is it impacting Maine the most?**

I think the two items that are resonating the most strongly in Maine — other than a generalized fear and anger — is Social Security and the [Veterans Affairs Department]. Those are iconic agencies that serve the public so well, and ... I'll tell you what, if Social Security checks are late next month or the month after, there's going to be hell to pay. And people instinctively support veterans. By the way, when you hear a thousand people are fired at some agency, chances are, 300 of them are veterans. About 30 percent of the federal workforce is veterans, and the VA is probably more.

One of the problems is, the people who are doing this — the DOGE people and Musk — literally don't know what they're doing. You can quote me on that. ... They don't know what these agencies do. They don't know what these programs do. They don't understand the implications back home of these programs and how important they can be.

Listen, I did a major restructuring of Maine state government the first year I was governor, but we did it with a task force of private citizens, legislators and administration people. And we did it over a period of almost a year, very deliberately, very slowly, with a lot of discussion back and forth, and then at the end, the plan had to be approved by the legislature. And yet we reduced the size of state government by almost 10 percent. But they're ... trying to do it, instead of in a year, they're trying to do it in two or three months, and as I said, they really don't know what they're doing.