

Commentary

White hats, black hats, and public policy.

As I have made editorial decisions about the content of the *Maine Policy Review*, I have tried to keep the focus on the policy issues rather than on the personalities involved in policy. That has not been an easy task. When one listens to the public debate on many issues in **Maine, personalities often seem to dominate.** For example, in the budget battles of the past few years, the relative merits of Governor John McKernan and Speaker John Martin often seemed more important than the policy questions of how much Maine must spend to **maintain its education system, its social services, or its transportation system.** Are the people of Maine really served by this obsessive focus on "white hats" and "black hats"?

This emphasis on personalities would seem not only to distract us from the underlying policy questions, but also to cripple the process itself. It is temptingly human to label anyone who disagrees with you as ill-willed or devious or incompetent. And one's personally-defined list of villains tends to grow longer as more political battles are fought. In a state as small as Maine, where the number of participants in the public policy process is relatively small, such personal assessments become an increasing obstacle to finding reasonable common ground.

I am tempted to single out the

press and its role in personalizing policy debates. Both the public and the press seem reluctant to wade through the complicated questions that swirl around social policy, natural resource and energy policy, or educational policy. On the other hand, it is deceptively easy to identify the "bad guys" who caused the problems in the first place. The "sound bite" seems to be the dominant medium of exchange in both the electronic and the printed press. But, the press simply reflects a deeply held American tradition that individuals, and not anonymous institutions, are the force in our society. Steven Jobs is a folk hero; the gnomes at IBM that gave us the "IBM-PC" are gray suits.

Perhaps I should digress to admit that I am both an economist and an academic. Economists were policy wonks long before the Clintons made it fashionable. And academics have always cherished the tradition of "disagreeing agreeably." Economists have never seen any harm in self-interest; in fact, we assume in our analyses that each individual does pursue her or his own self-interest. The design of institutions that make self-interest and the social interest coincident has been the central policy concern of economists across all policy areas, whether welfare reform or environmental protection or education finance. While compassion and benevolence are to be admired, good public policy must apply equally well to sinners as to saints.

Those who do not share my preference for policy over personality will perhaps dismiss that view as the forgivable eccentricity of an academic economist. Or perhaps they would prefer just to issue one more black hat.

-Ralph Townsend
Editor

CORRECTIONS

This is a clarification to last **issue's commentary on the** Natural Resources Council of Maine. In the commentary it was suggested that the Council's North Woods Conservation Area proposal would designate unorganized territories of Maine off-limits to residential development and land speculation. Actually, the Council has suggested that the Land Use Regulation Commission (LURc) put aside approximately 2 million acres precisely for residential development, while preserving the remainder for traditional uses (timber, recreation and wildlife). Further, the Council proposal would direct LURC to determine those areas in the unorganized territory most appropriate for residential development and those areas best suited for traditional uses.

In the September issue of MPR, we inadvertently neglected to credit Leslie Hudson, a former research assistant at the Smith Policy Center for her work on the portion of the Rethinking State Government article that concerned privatization of government **serVices**.