

Interview with Senator George Mitchell

Maine Policy Review (1998). Volume 7, Number 1

Senator Mitchell's leadership in Northern Ireland has earned him worldwide praise. Yet such praise is not surprising to citizens of Maine who have lauded the Senator for many years throughout his remarkable tenure in the United States Senate. In 1980, Senator Mitchell was appointed to the United States Senate to complete the unexpired term of Senator Edmund S. Muskie who had resigned to become Secretary of State. In 1982, after trailing in public opinion polls by thirty-six points, Senator Mitchell rallied to win his first election, receiving 61% of the votes cast. He went on to an illustrious career in the Senate spanning fourteen years, where he held the position of Senate Majority Leader from 1989-95 and, for six consecutive years, was voted "the most respected member" of the Senate. Earlier this year, MPR staff had the privilege of interviewing Senator Mitchell. In the wide-ranging discussion that ensued, MPR obtained Senator Mitchell's views on the declining public faith in Congress, the role of economics in furthering the peace process in Northern Ireland, and the Senator's prescription for remedying the "two Maines" problem, an issue, he notes, that was as much of concern twenty-five years ago as it is today.

MAINE POLICY REVIEW: *Public opinion polls show a deteriorating relationship between citizens and government. In particular, many people express feelings toward Congress that go beyond distrust to cynicism. They believe that Congress no longer works. With perhaps the lowest opinion ratings of the post-war era occurring now, we want to get your ideas on what can be done to restore faith in Congress.*

SENATOR GEORGE MITCHELL: Well, I think the first thing is to keep it in some perspective. The attitude of the public toward elected officials in American democracy has always been one of skepticism. A couple of years ago, I read an interesting book called *The Great Triumvirate*, a biography of Daniel Webster, John Calhoun, and Henry Clay, three of the United States' greatest legislators in the early nineteenth century. Both Webster and Clay were dogged with allegations of ethical impropriety throughout their lives: John Calhoun wrote, late in life, after he had served in a wide variety of positions in our government, that he felt his greatest political achievement was to be re-elected to the House of Representatives in 1816. In that year, for the first time, Congress raised its pay, and there was such a furor among the people that most of the incumbents were defeated. Calhoun was re-elected despite having voted for the pay raise. As I read the book, I thought, there is really nothing new in American politics.

I would add another cautionary note in drawing too negative a conclusion from the current state of affairs. Your question states that Congress does not work in the minds of the American people. That's no doubt accurate, if you describe "work" as passing a budget or reforming the health care system. However, the men who wrote the American Constitution had as their overriding objective the prevention of tyranny in America. They had lived under a British king;

they did not want ever to have to live under an American king. They placed the highest value on individual liberty.

In retrospect we can see they were brilliantly successful. We have had forty-two presidents and no kings. Americans enjoy a combination of personal freedom and shared material prosperity that is without parallel in the world, and arguably without parallel in human history. Therefore, who is to say that the institutions created by the Constitution don't work? When they are measured against the objective of the founders and the broader societal objectives of preserving individual liberty, creating opportunity, and giving people the chance to gain an education and improve their lives, they have been remarkably successful.

It is not fully accurate to suggest that we have broadly shared material prosperity and a higher degree of personal liberty solely as a result of the actions of Congress. I think you have to broaden not only the standard, but also who is responsible. That is to say, I think Congress has a role in achieving these goals, but so do the Judicial and Executive branches of government and private society. I think the proper formulation is that we've done well and Congress, along with other institutions in our society, deserves some of the credit.

With that said, I think we do have a different situation now, primarily because of the impact of television. Television has caused great changes to occur in our political process-as it has in all of our society. The ubiquitous nature of television, the power and impact of moving images, sound, and colorful presentation, means that what has always occurred in our society now occurs in a different way. Take for example negative campaigns: we have always had negative campaigns in America. You go back to the very beginning-the mud slung at Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and others, was very heavy. But the absence of television meant that it did not have the same impact as negative campaigns do today.

It is a mistake to think of politics as something separate and apart from the rest of society. Politics are subject to the same influences that affect the rest of society. These influences of modern life-technology communications, and changing standards in public life and the media-have led to a decline in public trust and confidence that is felt by all of our major institutions. In fact, it is interesting-and rather sad-to note that trust has declined among individuals and family members as well. It is an unfortunate-but no doubt true-commentary that one of the effects of the development of modern life has been to cause a decline in the traditional attitude that existed in American society. Congress has been a particular recipient of current negative attitudes because it is so prominent, public, and focused on by the media.

This is not to say that I don't share the general frustration with many of the things occurring in Congress. As the former Senate Majority Leader, I perhaps am more aware of them than anybody because the Senate is a unique institution where the rules permit obstruction and delay-the things that anger and frustrate people. I could go on at great length about the operations of Congress, and particularly the Senate, and how they have contributed to this negative public attitude. Clearly the actions of Congress as an institution and by many of its members have contributed to the decline in public trust- the increased partisanship, the political bickering, the exploitation of rules to the maximum for personal or party advantage, the loss of institutional

loyalty. All of these things have combined to bring about the sad state of affairs which you describe. It is most unfortunate.

MPR: *Where do you stand on campaign finance reform and term limits, arguably two efforts that are intended to restore the public's faith in its democratic institutions?*

MITCHELL: I believe strongly in the importance of campaign finance reform. I think the current system has led not just to a corruption of the political process, because of the disproportionate influence wielded by those with money, but, perhaps even more so, to the perception of that corruption among the public, which is probably greater than the reality, and is an independent factor in and of itself. The American people generally believe that members of Congress and other legislative bodies do not represent their constituents, but rather represent those who pay for the campaigns that elect them to office. Television has become an integral part of the political process. Television is expensive, and getting the money to go on television has become essential to political success. It does distort the process. Those who raise money as well as those who contribute to campaigns are generally persons and institutions with wealth in our society. As a result they exert a disproportionate influence on the legislative process.

MPR: *What about term limits?*

MITCHELL: The public has a right to elect who they want. There is, in fact, a substantial turnover in Congress. I think term limits are part of a trend in recent years-pushed primarily by Republicans and conservatives-to try and solve substantive problems through procedural changes; it is a way of avoiding the real problem or issue. It doesn't work, and usually there is a great deal of inconsistency, even hypocrisy, associated with its advocacy. Some of Congress' loudest advocates for term limits have been there for thirty or forty years. Many of them get elected on a platform of term limits and when their time comes they decide that it is better for them to stay. It is similar to many of the so-called gimmicks they have come up with to deal with the balanced budget, because they don't want to address the real issue of spending and the things that are necessary to promote economic growth. So, I think term limits are a gimmick designed to get a lot of attention; they don't have anything to do with the real problems in our society. They will create some change but I don't believe it will be meaningful or productive change. As someone who voluntarily left Congress, I can safely say that.

MPR: *Many believe the political process will be improved by greater use of public initiatives and referenda-essentially bypassing the representative process in favor of direct democracy. Is this a good trend? Should we encourage greater use of public initiatives and referenda?*

MITCHELL: There is clearly a movement toward direct democracy as opposed to representative democracy. However, I do not share the view that this will necessarily produce a better result. I do not share the view that elected officials in a democratic society are merely robots-there to simply determine and record the views of their constituents, wholly devoid of any personal judgment or conscience of their own. Rather, I think of them as representatives in a representative democracy. They are there not only to listen to and consider the views of their constituents but also to act in accordance with their own sense of judgment and conscience, even though that may on occasion put them in conflict with the views of their constituents,

I think putting everything to referendum probably makes a vice out of a virtue; that is to say, like everything else, public referenda have their place, but there has to be a limit and a sense of proportion to how they are used. Too often in recent years, they have been used as a means for a legislative body to avoid its responsibility, or a means by which people who can't get broad public support can keep raising an issue over and over again, hoping that a massive advertising campaign eventually will sway public opinion.

MPR: We promised to ask you questions related to another public role you have held recently-that as facilitator of the process that led to the establishment and now implementation of the Northern Ireland Peace Agreement. There are many in Maine who have followed Ireland's progress toward peace and stability because of their history and roots in that part of the world-their identification with the people of Ireland. Yet there is another reason why the people of Maine are paying attention to what's happening in Ireland: Ireland a small, predominantly rural country, somewhat smaller than Maine, with about three times the population. Yet last year Ireland's economy grew by almost 10%, and that fourth successive year of growth means the economy has expanded by a third in the years from 1993 to 1997. Its economy is the fastest growing in the European Union, and it has the highest levels of job creation in the industrial world, primarily in high-technology industries. Next year Ireland is projected to add another 49,000 jobs to the economy-a 3.6% rise in employment.

Our first question to you: To what degree do you believe Ireland's meteoric economic growth has contributed to the progress the people of Ireland are making in achieving a more peaceful and stable society?

MITCHELL: First, in a general sense, I fully believe that economic growth and job creation is the solvent of most social problems. Of course very few problems are rooted solely in economics. There are usually other factors as there are in Northern Ireland. Still, economics remains a large factor in every situation. In Northern Ireland, I think an impetus for the Agreement came as a result of the growing prosperity in the Republic of Ireland, and the changes in that society which have made it a less-threatening neighbor to some in the north. Second, the changes in Northern Ireland itself, particularly in the aftermath of the cease fires declared in August and October of 1994, created an impetus for the Agreement. When the barriers at the border came down, people were able to travel back and forth with ease, and there was a much more open and relaxed atmosphere-particularly in the cities of Northern Ireland. In fact, the largest year of tourism in Northern Ireland was 1995. When the cease fires were broken in 1996, tourism declined 8% and it has not yet recovered to the 1995 level.

It is worth noting that the American public's perception of Northern Ireland is inaccurate and incomplete, drawn largely from occasionally televised images of fire bombs and motorized troop carriers-scenes of destruction. As we all know, that's what makes news. The reality of life in Northern Ireland involves much more. It's an energetic society and an extremely productive and literate people. If they can get past the images and the reality of the past, in terms of the amount of violence and the threat of violence, there will be a liberating and huge impact on the economy.

MPR: *A recent New York Times article reported that business leaders in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland are moving ahead quickly to establish joint ventures, acting almost as if there are no political barriers.*

MITCHELL: Yes. One of the problems in Northern Ireland in the past has been the separation between much of society and the political process, which most clearly manifested itself in the way the business community simply didn't get involved in the political process. Both the business community and the political process were the losers for that. I think now there is a recognition that the business community has a central role to play and business leaders are increasing their interest and involvement-as they should.

MPR: *What do you think will be the biggest challenges for the people of Ireland in the next few years?*

MITCHELL: The implementation of this Agreement will take a very long time. There were the elections to the Assembly in June. Now there is the process of creating the Assembly and having it begin to function. This is entirely new; the processes and procedures are new. There will be dozens of crises and all kinds of ways in which opponents can create difficulty. In addition, the actions contemplated by the Agreement on policing and criminal justice have to be completed. There will be separate commissions set up to deal with those subjects, which will report in the summer and fall of 1999. Also, new north-south institutions have to be created. There will be a new British/Irish Agreement; there will be a new institution-the British-Irish Council, or the so-called Council of the Isles.

So, you have a half-dozen new institutions, several extremely emotional subjects, including the release of prisoners and the subject of decommissioning. The next three years will be difficult and dangerous in terms of the whole process being thrown off track or in reverse, and yet full of opportunities for those who want to make it work.

Beyond that, I think the reality of the European Union will serve to bring closer together the economies, not just of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but of the Republic of Ireland and all of the United Kingdom. Once the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland become a part of the European Union, their economies will be aligned more closely than they have been for a long time. I think this offers a very exciting prospect for the future. As you mentioned, Ireland now has the fastest growing economy in the European Union. The United Kingdom also is doing well; Northern Ireland is not doing quite as well as other parts of the United Kingdom, but over all, doing pretty well. There is a promise of better days ahead.

MPR: *We'd like to ask you about one particular challenge that is not unique to the Irish people. How can different communities maintain a sense of ethnic pride and identity without resorting to derisive forms of expression? What do you regard as safe and peaceful outlets for ethnic pride and identity?*

MITCHELL: Well, I think the Agreement reached on Good Friday is a good start because it explicitly acknowledges the legitimacy of the aspirations of both communities, and it enables each to act in a manner consistent with its national aspirations - provided those actions are

carried out through democratic and peaceful means. The Agreement is not an either/or situation, but one in which diversity can be tolerated and can in fact generate mutual respect. Once the Agreement is widely accepted as a good thing, then a lot of what has been threatening will not be seen as so threatening to the two communities.

Ireland's whole history and culture is one of "I win, you lose." There is no such thing as what we Americans call a "win-win situation." Everything is played out as in a zero-sum game. With every decision made, if one side likes it, then the other side, by definition, will dislike it. When someone wins something, there is no such thing as the magnanimous victor. It's always, "let me rub the other guy's nose in it, if I can" and "let me poke a finger in his eye, if it is possible." This kind of thinking has created a provocative atmosphere, one of hostility, and one intended to convey insult.

Hopefully, all of that will begin to change with the Agreement, although it would be naive and foolish to think that the Agreement, in and of itself, will change that. The Agreement creates an opportunity for change that can be implemented over

time-if people recognize how important it is to be positive, work together, and look for common solutions to problems, rather than always looking at what it is that divides them, or what it is that distinguishes them from the other community.

MPR: *Are there lessons that can be derived from what's happening in Northern Ireland that hold out some hope for other trouble spots around the world?*

MITCHELL: I think the most important message demonstrated by what's happening in Northern Ireland is that no problem is incapable of solution, that problems created by men and women can be solved by men and women. This is not a natural disaster that has befallen Northern Ireland; it is a disaster created by men and women, and is therefore capable of solution by men and women.

I was struck, throughout my three years in Northern Ireland, by the pessimism of the people. I can't tell you how many times dozens, maybe hundreds of people would come up to me on the street, at the airport, in a restaurant, wherever I happened to be, almost always very politely, almost always quite complimentary "Thank you, Senator-we really appreciate what you are doing. We know you're working hard. You're making a great sacrifice." Then, always, at the end-"But you are wasting your time. This problem can't be solved. We are doomed to conflict here forever"-a sort of dark belief that nothing good could ever happen. I think combating that belief was one of my most important tasks; it was something I tried hard to do during the entire three-year period I was there. I worked to create the impression that the conflict could be solved if men and women had enough determination, commitment, and will. I think that is an important lesson for other areas.

As to the specifics, as each individual human being is unique, so each society is unique; each social problem faced by people in different societies is unique. There is no magic wand or formula you can take off the shelf and apply in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, the Middle East, and other places. What is necessary to solve the problems in each of these places is patience, understanding, and a desire to create a situation in which people can make an accommodation to

live side by side. Of course, that is much easier said than done. I think the institutions and the structures come long before what is in the hearts and minds of the people. The hardest thing to change is what is in people's minds and hearts, and that can only come over time.

In 1992 I had the opportunity to visit Pabrac, a small town in Croatia. It was an interesting situation because there was such wide-spread devastation. In a village near Pabrac, every building had been destroyed. First, the Serbs took over and they burned every Croat building in town. Then, the fortunes of war changed; the Croats took over and burned every Serb building. As I walked through the rubble, I asked myself, "Who won the war?" because it was impossible to tell. As in Northern Ireland, there was a negative, overall pessimistic attitude. I asked the mayor of Pabrac, "How long will it be before Serbs and Croats can again live together?" A man standing next to him answered immediately by shouting, "Never!" The mayor, on the other hand, thought for a while and then answered, "We will repair our buildings long before we repair our souls."

MPR: Senator, we have one more question for you that relates to an issue closer to home. As you know this than election year. Like every election year, it seems, the status of Maine's economy and how to improve it has become central to each of the candidates' platforms. One of the issues that is of concern to many people to Maine is this phenomenon of the "two Maines." While Maine's southern and coastal economies enjoy rapid growth and low unemployment, other regions of the state continue to struggle, losing not only jobs but also young people who are migrating to southern regions of the state and out-of-state in search of decent jobs.

How do we create shared economic prosperity across Maine? Ireland is a good example of a small country that has made a remarkable turnaround. Should we be emulating what it has done?

MITCHELL: Well, of course the problem is not new. In 1974 I ran for governor, and much of my campaign dwelled on the issue of the two Maines and what to do about it. A quarter of a century later the problem persists, discussion continues, and yet no conclusive solution has been possible. First off, I think you have to distinguish Maine from Ireland. One of the reasons that the Irish have been so successful is they have an aggressive national program of tax and other incentives that a single state-which is one out of fifty states in the country-doesn't have the same flexibility to produce. Maine does control its tax policies but those are often less significant than federal tax policies. Therefore, states do not have the same freedom of movement that a sovereign country has in such matters.

I think the only solution to the two Maines problem is to improve Maine's infrastructure and place greater emphasis on education and the teaching of skills. I think there will be no possibility for success without a touch more substantial investment in education and the acquisition of skills. I think this applies everywhere; of course-not just to Maine, but to every state in the Union. While it is a heartwarming part of American history that many people have risen to a high level of success in business, politics, and the arts, without any substantial formal education, the reality is those stories will occur much less frequently in the future. There will have to be education and knowledge to succeed in the twenty-first century because, increasingly, economic growth will be based upon the possession, dissemination, collation, understanding, and

distribution of knowledge and information. So, I think what Maine needs is a much greater investment and attention to infrastructure-as in transportation, communications, and most importantly, education.

I also think it is just as critical to raise the aspirations of Maine's young people. In 1981, less than a year after I entered the Senate, I was invited to a conference at the University of Maine. The subject was the aspirations of young people in Maine. I was shocked and saddened to hear that the aspirations of young people in Maine were very low. There seemed to be a basic feeling of inferiority and disinterest in education, of not believing that you can really get ahead through education, and that Maine kids can't compete nationally. It was after that conference that I made up my mind to go personally to every high school in Maine, to try, as best I could, to lift aspirations. I have continuously referred to my own background and experience. My mother was an immigrant, my father the orphan son of immigrants; my mother worked nights in a textile mill, my father was a janitor who had little or no formal education. I went to a public school in Maine. I guess in a sense my experience was typical of many other youngsters in Maine. Yet I was able to become Majority Leader of the United State Senate. Any child in Maine could become President in the future, or Majority Leader of the Senate. They just have to be willing to work at it, and they have to have the opportunity to get a good education-which fortunately I had. So, I believe you need two things: You have to make the skills and the knowledge available, and you have to raise the aspirations of people to take advantage of that. I think these ingredients are very badly needed in Maine.

Full cite: Maine Policy Review. 1998. *Interview With Senator George Mitchell.* Vol. 7(1): 22-29.