

Governing for the People

by Kenneth Curtis

I have been asked why I entered politics. Well, I think anybody who lived in Maine in those years would have been discouraged and would have asked himself, “Isn’t there something better out there for me?” I grew up in a small rural town and went to a one-room school-house with one teacher for eight grades. The kids that you talked to were reconciled to the fact they were just going to finish out their days in that town. They didn’t have any dreams, they didn’t have any hopes, and it seemed a bad way for young people to go.

My education wasn’t the best in the world, but I did get a ticket on the train, which is so essential for any young person today. So, I decided to pursue politics as a career, as a way, perhaps, to try to effect change.

One of the major pieces of legislation we were able to get through was the reorganization of state government. When I became governor, we had 213 agencies and commissions that really didn’t report to anybody, and most of all, the commissioners were not appointed by the governor. When you get elected, you inherited all those that were already there, and that seemed to me a hard way to administer anything.

How did we pass [our] legislation? There is a lot to be said about that, with a Democratic governor and a Republican legislature. It really boiled down to counting votes. A third of the Republican legislators would never do anything to help you, would never vote for any legislation you proposed, but that left all the rest. And all the rest really cared about Maine and the kind of things that we were espousing in those days. These were legitimate needs—needs of the state—and many Republicans recognized this. So, by spending a lot of time with them, letting them become involved in the whole process, many of them came around, and we could ultimately count on their votes.

One story I always like to tell is of the late Senator Harrison Richardson of Portland, who was at first one of my biggest Republican opponents. In the end, Harry drafted the income tax bill that became law. He came up with a version that was in fact better than the one we had. You knew that when a Republican leader came forward with a draft bill, you had better take it because he was going to vote for it, that’s for sure. That’s pretty

much the way it went. The needs were there, it was timely, and I don’t know that it was anything more special than offering Maine people what they wanted and needed, on a bipartisan basis. 🐟

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Kenneth M. Curtis served as governor of Maine from 1967 to 1975. He began his political career as an aide to Congressman James Oliver in the 1950s. During the Curtis administration, Maine enacted several major pieces of legislation, including a state income tax, environmental laws, and the establishment of the University of Maine system. After leaving the governorship, Curtis served as U.S. Ambassador to Canada from 1979 to 1981.