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The Importance of Listening

by George Mitchell

On the day I was elected Senate Majority Leader, among the first persons I called [to visit] was Bob Dole of Kansas, then the Republican Leader of the Senate. I said to him that these are very tough jobs; that he had been in the Senate for many years, and I was relatively new, just a few years in the Senate. And that I did not think either of us could succeed, nor could the Senate, if there were no trust between us. I said, “I’ve come here to tell you how I intend to behave toward you and to ask if you would reciprocate, and act the same way toward me.”

Then I described the most simple, basic principles of fairness and common courtesy. I told him that I would never surprise him, that’s important in the Senate; that I’ll always give him the opportunity to think about his response to any action I was going to take as Majority Leader. I told him I would never try to embarrass him; that I would never criticize him personally when we disagreed, to the extent that I could humanely do so; and that I would keep the debate on the merits of the issue, and not make it personal. Bob Dole was delighted. He shook my hand and to this moment, never has one harsh word passed between him and me—never in public or in private.

We interpret events in a manner consistent with our prior beliefs. If we are to break out of the situation we’re in, there have to be individual and collective efforts to try better to listen, to understand the point of view of those whom we oppose. People ask me often, How did it happen in Northern Ireland, with hundreds of years of conflict and many prior efforts to bring about a solution? There are all kinds of reasons—far too many to go into today—but I’m certain that one of the reasons I was able to gain the confidence of the parties to the negotiations is that I *listened*. I especially listened to the people whose views I didn’t agree with. We all have to make an effort to open up our ears and our minds to those with whom we disagree, and we all have to have the humility to accept the reality that we are not always right—no individual, no institution, no political party.

As a country, we don’t always succeed in matching our actions to our aspirations, and sometimes we fail—sometimes out of genuine necessity, sometimes out of

error, sometimes out of mistaken judgment. But the fact is, in the United States, we recognize it, and we try. In the end, what really matters is that we can’t stray too far from our aspirations. We can’t be for democracy here and not for it elsewhere. We can’t define democracy as the election of a government that agrees with everything we do. If they have the right of self-governance, they are going to produce results that we disagree with at times. 🐟

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George Mitchell was a U. S. senator from Maine from 1980 to 1995, and served as Majority Leader from 1989 to 1995. He led the re-authorization of the Clean Air Act of 1990, and the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. He also guided passage of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement in 1994.