

Maine Policy Review

Volume 23 | Issue 2

2014

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Recommended Citation

Mitchell, Elizabeth ". . "Productive Partisanship." *Maine Policy Review* 23.2 (2014) : 38 -38, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol23/iss2/9>.

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Productive Partisanship

by Elizabeth “Libby” Mitchell

I want to talk about some real differences today between Maine and Washington, which seems like a foreign government. Maine is like Washington in some ways, but in others, it's not. There are real differences.

I've had a personal relationship with each person who has spoken in this lecture series, and this is part of why Maine is different. Peter Mills and I come from different sides of the aisle, and we can talk easily about bipartisanship. There's nobody I respected more in the Maine Senate than Peter. I worked together with him many times and argued with him when we disagreed, but we never disagreed personally, ever.

When Maine had its own shutdown (in 1991), I had just come back to the legislature. I had been there for 10 years, left, and came back. I became chair of the Banking and Insurance Committee, right in middle of what was going on, that so roiled the political temperature in Maine.

The Maine's Workers' Compensation market was totally broken; everybody was in what was called the “residual” market. If you had an unsafe workplace, or the safest in the world, you paid the same rates. Well, everybody knows that's not right—whether you're a Democrat or Republican—but it was also tied to the perception for some, the reality for others, that the benefits for injured workers were too high and there needed to be workers' compensation reform. When negotiations between the Republicans and the Democrats totally bogged down over the budget and workers' compensation reform, we went into shutdown mode. It changed me, and it changed my later actions as Speaker. Tents arose in Capitol Park, horns blared all night long, the committees of jurisdiction met around the clock with the chief executive, Governor John McKernan.

[A shutdown] is toxic to both parties. It is toxic to the institution. It is really something that no one would ever want to do again. My own Banking and Insurance Committee worked through all of this and created the basis for reform, what's known as a self-insurance model, called MMC. Basically, if you don't hurt people, you don't pay much, and if you hurt people, you pay more. MMC is one of the success stories of that horrible shutdown, but it took a terrible toll on everybody.

I want to describe the respect for the [legislature] I got from Senator Bennett Katz, who was a successful businessman from downtown Augusta. I watched how he ran committees, how he demanded respect for the public. I think it starts there; demand that the committee members treat the public with respect. If they don't, the Senate President and House Speaker appoint members to the committees, and they can take them off. That authority has to be exercised when needed.

You really can't have our leaders calling one another “spoiled brats” and such. You can't have leaders calling each other unworthy to serve in public office. This is not civil discourse. I believe in principled partisanship, and I'm going to close with this. To paraphrase E. J. Dionne, “You know, I might disagree with the Republicans on just how many benefits an injured worker should have, but I still like my Republican friends. They may be right, and I need to talk to them about it.” That's principled partisanship. 🐉

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The full version of this lecture was published in Barringer, Richard, and Kenneth Palmer, eds. 2014. *Politics Then and Now, in Maine and the Nation: Conversations with the Sages*. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine, Portland, ME. <http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/Publications/Politics-Then-and-Now-large.pdf>



Elizabeth Mitchell served in the Maine House of Representatives from 1974 to 1984, from 1990 to 1998, and in the Maine Senate from 2004 to 2010. Elected House Speaker for the 1997–99 term and president of the Senate from 2009 to 2011, she was the first woman in the United States to preside over both branches of a state legislature.