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PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION: A CHALLENGE FOR THE 90's

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In *The Dialogues of Plato* there is an exchange between Socrates and Protagoras that frequently haunts me as I go about my lobbying in the halls of the Maine Statehouse and the U.S. Congress. Let me quote it directly:

"Do I understand you," I (Socrates) said, "and is your meaning that you teach the art of politics, and that you promise to make men good citizens?"

"That, Socrates, is exactly the profession which I make."

"Then," I said, "you do indeed possess a noble art, if there is no mistake about this, for I will freely confess to you, Protagoras, that I have a doubt whether this art is capable of being taught."

While it has not been my intention or desire to go through life challenging the wisdom of Socrates, what haunts me is the belief that this has been one particular nugget of his wisdom that our society has too readily accepted.

Socrates, of course, would accept and, indeed, relish a challenge to his belief, and that is the challenge I bring to you today.

And Socrates would, I think, especially appreciate the idea of that challenge being brought on the two hundredth anniversary of the approval and signing of the United States Constitution at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.

That Constitution, our Constitution, challenges us to participatory democracy. Participatory democracy, like it or not, demands of us a populace educated, wise and practiced in the art and science of politics.

Public policy is, above all else, a political endeavor.

I believe your special task as public policy educators is to recognize that fact and formulate your programs and your teaching so as to prove Socrates wrong.

It is, frankly, no longer relevant, Socrates forgive me, whether politics *can* be taught. It is rather than in today's complex, pluralistic society it is absolutely critical that all of us practice and participate in our political system and in the development of public policies. Politics *must* be taught.

America is too much a nation of myths. One of those unfortunate myths says that the so-called average citizen, the "little person," cannot make any difference in the shaping of policies, the outcomes of politics.

As educators it is incumbent upon you to destroy myths. Make this particular myth your first target.

Too often those who teach public policy do so in an ivory tower, a sterile environment that ignores the real-life workings of our political system.

Public administration and policy making are taught at higher education institutions in Maine. But, believe it or not, their curriculum has no place in it for interaction with, participation in, or even study of, the Maine legislature.

Yet, it is the legislature that decides how much money the University of Maine gets, which people will pay what taxes to raise those revenues, what environmental laws the university must comply with, how much assistance will be available to mothers and children who have no means of support and a thousand other decisions that determine how we live and the rules of our society.

And that legislature, like all legislatures, federal and state, is not made up exclusively of experts in educational funding, or public health, or tax accounting or any other specialty. It is made up of citizens from all walks of life who have chosen to participate in the process and because of that decision now influence the process. Yet we choose not to consider that process a teachable one!

Which brings us back to Socrates. Or rather Protagoras. For in response to Socrates' doubts, Protagoras said, referring to the Athenians, "They consider it natural to recognize all men as competent to give advice on questions related to political excellence. They consider it to be a teachable thing possessed in every case as a result of teaching and practice rather than of chance or birth."

Public policy is not made solely through an exchange of theories and ideas. Public policy cannot be taught solely through a reading of texts.

Federal and state legislators make public policies in a swirling cauldron whose ingredients include vote counting, constituent pressures, political ambition, media attention, competing ideas, competing data, competing interest groups and, yes, the ever present pristine theories by the experts. Educators must put their hands, and

the hands of those they teach, into that cauldron. Yes, it can be hot, but it won't burn I assure you.

I have seen public policies made, laws passed and laws changed because of what one citizen has said to one legislator, the cries and pleadings of those so-called evil special interest groups going for naught. I have seen legislators open letters at their desks on the floor of the Maine legislature and cast a vote just as asked by one letter.

I can guarantee you that in the legislature of the rural state of Maine, several small campaign contributions, a couple of hours of campaign work or even a phone call from a legislator's or candidate's neighbor and constituent means a lot more than any contribution from a political action committee or any six-page slick memo from a public policy consultant.

I call my business public policy consulting. Nice words that mean lobbyist. I represent—lobby—for many of those special interest groups we hear about. The media like to portray our political system as a constant struggle between evil special interest groups and everyone else—the regular or real citizens.

But all of us, even regular and real citizens, are special interests—educators, administrators, nonsmokers (and I represent them by the way so maybe I'm not all bad), restaurant owners, hospital administrators, poor people, truck drivers and so on. Every citizen who contacts his or her legislator, to support or oppose something, is a special interest.

And that is O.K. For what our system demands more than anything else is that our elected policy makers, who must dish out a decision from that swirling cauldron, have a stew into which *all* the ingredients, not just a selected few, have been thrown.

Even though I am a lobbyist, I do not expect, nor do I get, absolute acceptance of everything I say or advocate for my clients. I've got to prove my case, as does anyone who opposes my clients. There aren't many issues in public policy making that are simple; issues in which the solution is clear, obvious, moral and affordable. I can make the best case possible for my issue and my client, but if a legislator hasn't heard from a single constituent supporting my issue or describing how it will affect him or her, he's not likely to want to pay much attention to what I am saying, and less to what I may be asking him to do in the name of public policy.

Contrary to another one of those popular myths, and using the vernacular one sees on bumperstickers these days, "Lobbyists don't do it alone!" Maybe I should say, "Lobbyists can't do it alone!"

So I do what you should be doing. I educate my clients, my association members, my executive groups and occasionally the public-at-large about the legislative process, about advocacy, about

participating in and influencing public policy. I teach it, Socrates notwithstanding.

I teach how the legislature is set up, what its powers and duties and responsibilities are, what the process of legislation is, the importance of credibility, compromise and, certainly, of counting votes; what advocacy tools should be used and, perhaps most importantly, that it is O.K. to do it, to lobby, to seek to influence and, yes, to be a special interest—of one or one thousand. I teach that it is essential to do it.

No one else teaches it here in Maine. The law school teaches law, but not how laws are made. They have apparently taken to heart Chancellor Bismarck's famous adage that the two things human beings should not be allowed to see being made are sausages and laws.

The university public policy programs don't teach a thing about the legislative process. No political science curriculum includes courses on policy making and the legislative process.

I see corporation executives, lawyers and other professionals, successful entrepreneurs, college presidents, administrators of multimillion dollar institutions and agencies and countless others who neither know how the political system works nor how the decisions that affect them—enormously in many cases—are made. They are, most unhappily, fearful of putting their hands in the cauldron.

Be assured that it is not just the popular "little person" who thinks you cannot influence city hall, it is a lot of big people as well.

But size isn't the issue here. The issue here, the challenge here for you, is to join Socrates, who, of course, by the end of his dialog with Protagoras has agreed that politics, and all knowledge, is indeed teachable. Teach and advocate political participation, recognize the value, importance and critical necessity of communicating with, working with and influencing the legislative processes that so influence all of our lives.

Let me close with two quotes, one lengthy and scholarly, one short and simple and, frankly, my favorite.

In his book *Political Innovation in America, the Politics of Policy Innovation*, Nelson Polsby, professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley, says it is an "illusion that powerful rather than knowledgeable people are the inventors of public policy. The case studies suggest that policy innovations tend to belong to people who take an interest in them."

Polsby offers us advice with which, as a political practitioner, I can heartily concur:

"Innovation in American politics is not always the work of a day, and the pursuit of successful innovation is consequently often not a task for those who need quick gratification. Possibly the commonest

mistake made by observers and participants who favor innovation is to give up too soon, to measure gains only in the very short run, to become discouraged and to be tempted by tactics that are momentarily gratifying, but self-destructive over the medium term."

Or, as my mother would say, "Rome wasn't built in a day."

Finally, Polsby says we must value "those persons and events that rock the boat, that increase the pressures upon decision makers to act, and those persons who think deeply about problems, search for and invent alternatives and who keep alternative solutions alive and available to decision makers."

So you can see there is clearly much to do for those who teach.

My last, favorite, and definitely the most appropriate quote about legislative advocacy I have ever seen goes as follows: "You can't always get what you want. But if you try sometimes, you just might find . . . you get what you need." Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones.