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Educators as Leaders

A Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett
February 13, 2014

What do Mike Mansfield, Pat Williams, Jon Tester, Bob Brown and Angela McLean have in common?

Mike Mansfield, Senate Majority Leader longer than anyone in US history, led a US Senate that was arguably the most productive in US history.

Pat Williams, elected Montana Congressman for nine straight terms, more than anyone in our history, had a record of legislative accomplishment in fields as varied as labor, education, the arts, wilderness and public lands access.

Jon Tester, now our senior Senator, has a demonstrated ability to bring people with strongly divergent views together to deal with contentious issues and bring common sense to an otherwise dogmatic debate in Washington DC.

Bob Brown, a 28-year state legislator and Secretary of State, established a long record of legislative accomplishment and a reputation for across-the-aisle solution-seeking.

Angela McLean, newly appointed Lieutenant Governor, lead the Montana Board of Regents under two Governors in freezing tuition for Montana's students and making higher education more affordable and accessible.

What does this diverse group have in common?

All were teachers. All were educators. All inspired students to do their best before they inspired policymakers and citizens to come together for the common good.

The appointment of Angela McLean, a world class teacher, as Lt. Governor, makes me think about the things that good teachers bring to the public arena, things that distinguish them from the everyday politician. I am so glad to see Angela's bright light shining in the world of politics where so often darkness overwhelms enlightenment.

All of these teachers-turned-leaders respected their students' minds and also respected the voters' intellect. They presented facts and sound logical concepts for voters to critically evaluate and consider. That's unlike so many politicians today who do not try to enlighten their constituents but actually try to manipulate their thinking.

In much of today's political world, dogma has replaced reason, facts have been replaced by beliefs. For many of today's political leaders, you don't have to rationally justify a position if that position is divinely inspired. And if anyone challenges that divinely inspired position, they must be evil. In that world, there is no battle of competing ideas to be considered by the minds of the voter/citizens and there is no

basis upon which to find common ground and solutions to move ahead for the benefit of overall society. If one cannot compromise an article of faith in the political world, that's bad for democracy.

When facts and circumstances change, teachers ask their students to re-evaluate based upon the evidence and maybe even modify their position. When Mike Mansfield, a true internationalist, observed the reality of US involvement in Vietnam, he was compelled to move from support for that war to opposition, even though it meant a major break with his principle benefactor and friend, President Lyndon Johnson. How does that compare with today's neo-con true believers who still try to justify the death and destruction of an Iraq war built upon a fabrication.

Pat Williams was raised in Butte where mining paychecks sustained families for generations. Because of economics, it was in his political interest to turn a blind eye to the environmental devastation that came with old mining practices. But, the facts about that devastation were unchallengeable to an open mind and an observant eye, so Pat had to stand for human health and safety. Contrast that with those on the rigid right who uniformly condemn the EPA and any environmental and health enforcement.

Jon Tester could have been guiding a class discussion as he asked long-standing opponents in the wilderness/jobs debate to confront facts and commonalities in an effort to break a multi-decade logjam that stalled both wilderness and jobs. As a teacher, he asked all parties deal with the facts, seek solutions not blame, dialogue not shouting, flexibility not stridency, opening the door for finding common ground.

Bob Brown as teacher, legislator, and Secretary of State believes in a democracy with clean elections based upon factual positions -- elections not tainted by dark money, elections that are validated by the broadest citizen participation by voting. To Brown, it is the people who legitimize our democracy, a position that is in contrast to so many today who seek to limit citizen voting because it might give them a political advantage.

And none of these teacher-leaders followed the warped political tenet that if you tell a lie long enough and often enough you can get people to believe it is the truth.

Yes, teachers like Mansfield, Williams, Tester, Brown and now Angela McLean give one hope that this grand American experiment in Democracy can continue to be a guiding light to the world.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte thinking about the teachers among us who daily elevate our human prospects.

Evan Barrett, Butte, has spent the last 44 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.