Introduction

It is a personal pleasure and honor to introduce today’s special guest. Elected time and again to the Maine House of Representatives and to the Maine Senate, she is the first woman in American history elected to both a House speakership and a Senate presidency.

President John F. Kennedy once said, “Values lie at the very heart of our government – not ideology, not principles, not interests, but values.” By values, JFK meant the things we hold most dear, things that we cherish and are willing to defend with our lives, if needed; so when the pressure is on and issues come at us like water from a fire hose, we know where to turn for decisions that are true to ourselves and to those who brought us here.

I have known our guest for almost 40 years. Our children grew up together. I have watched with admiration her unflagging efforts as a legislator to build a stronger and better Maine for Maine people. Hers are values learned from long hours working in her family’s grocery store in South Carolina, on a neighbor’s farm while in school and in college, and here in Maine. They include the values of hard work, patriotism, support for the less fortunate and the voiceless, dignity for every individual, and opportunity for all.

Through a long and distinguished public career, Libby has applied these values to advance especially the cause of children, to defend the interests of working people, to create good jobs and a stronger environment, to extend constitutional rights to all citizens, and to reach principled agreement with the other party, as she has done often on budget and bonding matters in Augusta.

A native of South Carolina, her picture today adorns the wall of the Maine Women’s Hall of Fame at the University of Maine at Augusta, with every good reason. Please join me in welcoming a true Maine pioneer, Elizabeth “Libby” Mitchell. (R.B.)

LIBBY MITCHELL: Thank you very much. I only wish each of you could have the honor of being introduced by Dick Barringer; it would make you feel very, very great! Thank you, Dick, for your friendship and for the opportunity to be here. Thank you, Ken, for helping to put this series together. I am honored to be part of this speakers’ series; and honored that so many of you took time out of your day to think about where we’ve been and where we are going.
The Maine Difference

My topic today is Politics Then and Now; and you might want to say, “The more things change, the more they stay the same;” but, of course that is not true. 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 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.

What better governor has Maine ever had than Ken Curtis? Curtis wanted some of the best and brightest he could find, to surround himself with and advise him on policy matters. He brought into his administration the likes of Peter Bradford, who went on to national prominence in the utility regulation field; Kermit Lipez, now a distinguish federal justice; Walter Corey; and my own husband, Jim Mitchell – wonderful men, all. Wonderfully, Ken Curtis wasn’t intimidated by their degrees; he would listen to them and if he agreed, would say, “That’s very good, let’s try it”. Or, if he didn’t, he said, “No, thank you, that’s not the way we do it in Maine;” and they would move on.

You may not know it, but George Mitchell wasn’t always famous. At one point I was one of the chairs of his campaign committee. At the time I was the first woman House Majority Leader, and it was very good to have a woman out-front in your campaign; but that’s not the real story. I’m from Vassalboro, Maine, in spite of my accent, and that’s where we’ve lived since 1971, thanks to Ken Curtis. George Mitchell could not get his picture in the paper, for any reason. One of our friends worked for Heifer International, and they were getting ready to send a heifer to Saudi Arabia. So, Mitchell thought, “Well, maybe if I come out to Vassalboro, get my picture taken with Libby Mitchell and that cow, I might get in the paper.” So, he got there and we took the picture.

Sure enough, next day in the Waterville Sentinel, on the front page, there’s George Mitchell and me. He was pretty proud of himself. The following day he was going to door-to-door, went up to one door and this farmer came out. George said very proudly, “Did you see my picture in the paper? What did you think about it?” And the farmer replied, “Well, I think they should send you to Saudi Arabia and keep the cow!” George Mitchell has told that story many times over; I think that’s what catapulted him to his major victories and fame – because he has a sense of humor and he’s from down home.

I have had the privilege of serving in the Legislature with Olympia Snowe, another extraordinary person; and whenever I went to Washington, I would always go to her office and she would drop what she was doing to make sure she said hello. It didn’t matter to her that I had been the Democratic leader for all these years, because she understood the process and the people; and she worked for the people of Maine.

During independent Gov. Angus King’s tenure, I was Speaker of the House and got the chance to work with him on the Maine Policy Scholars program. It brings together a student from every campus of the University of Maine System with a faculty member, to develop and make a policy a presentation on a topic of public interest. Then-Governor, now Senator King made it their assignment to write a memo to the governor, so it wasn’t just an exercise in thinking about it. “Give us a plan,” he said, “What do you want to do?” They have looked at everything from clam flats to nuclear energy, and the students are just amazing.

“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 series; and this is part of why Maine is different.... Maine is very up close and personal.”

Barney Frank and I worked together raising funds for Equality in Marriage. I have never heard anybody who knows health care better or talks about it more than Tom Allen. These are our role models. This is what we expect in Maine. Bill Cohen, Margaret Chase Smith, Susan Collins, all of these people in a state of a million people. We have an honor roll that is known everywhere for its national leaders; and certainly no one could ever forget Ed Muskie, as we stand in this hall named for him; and the lasting legacy he’s given us for our air and water, for his vision, and for making sure the American people knew the strong, independent spirit of Maine people who won’t settle for anything but the best.

I start thinking about then and now, and how things change. I’ve never seen a bleaker time in Washington. We dwell on this every day as we look at this shutdown that continues on, and is not in the best interest of anyone. I won’t embarrass my daughter too much (she is here today) by telling you she was once in a play called, Bye Bye Birdie. There’s a great moment in it where they sing, “Kids! What’s the matter with kids today? Why can’t they be like we were, perfect in every way?!?" Sometimes we
like to think, “Why can’t politics be like it was in the good old days?” Well, the good old days weren’t always that good.

I learned today from a former staffer in Washington that, back in the old days, congressmen and women and senators got a ticket home just four times a year, paid for by the government. So they stayed in Washington, their kids went to school in Washington. They had dinner and picnics together, and they got to know one another in a different way. It’s pretty hard to yell at Peter Mills when you’ve just had a back-yard hamburger with him.

Now they go home every weekend. The same is true in Augusta. I’m not saying the old Augusta House was ideal, because in those days all the legislators stayed there, and the lobbyists just brought along bills they had already drafted. I’m not sure that was so good. We had our fights, then and now. We had our own government shutdown in the State of Maine in 1991.

Political Waves & Cycles

When I ran for the Maine House in 1974, all you needed was shoe leather – going to bean suppers and county fairs, and knocking on doors. That’s all it took. Not a lot of money, because you can’t raise a lot of money with bake sales, in the first place; and the stakes for money were not very high then. That is not true of a House race even in Maine today; but it’s still possible, because Maine is very up close and personal.

We have a million people, and 151 House seats. I see a newly elected legislator sitting here in this room. I’ll bet you knocked on every door in the district, and people got to know you. They see you in the supermarket. My young children (now grown) used to pull on my coat to leave, every time I would bump into someone, because everyone wanted to talk about taxes or the environment or state employee wages.

I once had a wonderful experience. They say I look very much like the woman who was then my State Senator, Beverly Bustin of Augusta; and people got us mixed up all the time. I was once coming out of the grocery store, when this lady and two crying children ran up to me, “Senator Bustin, can you help me with this problem?” I said, “Could you just call me at home please.” And, so, we escaped; but that’s Maine politics – up close and personal

There are waves in political life. I was first elected in 1974, and I thought it was because I was such a great candidate. But guess what? That was the year the Maine House went Democratic for the first time in many years. It was the anti-Nixon, anti-Watergate election. As a matter of fact, most people said, “Well, we might as well vote for you, you couldn’t do any worse.” Now, that’s not a ringing endorsement. I also got a little bit of money donated to my campaign, because then-Democratic Party chairman Severin Beliveau had had his office bugged as part of the Watergate scandal; and he received financial compensation and gave it to all the Democratic House candidates. At any rate, that was a national wave.

In 2010 the Democratic tide went out; and it happened all over the country, in many ways and places. It didn’t matter if you said, “Wait a minute, I don’t come from Wall Street, I didn’t cause this financial meltdown.” If you were a Democrat and you held office, and you tried to tell people, “Wait, look at what we’ve done!” They would say “If you’re so good, why am I hurting so badly?” There was this reaction.

There are cycles in politics, and they’re like waves. They alone don’t cause the change, and many people survive it. But those were two major changes that I was involved in. I wasn’t running for re-election to the House; I was running for the governorship, and I felt the steam of that wave, very strongly.

Political Money

I want to talk about money for just a bit. There’s a doctrine of unintended consequences that I’ve observed and embraced throughout my political life. After Watergate, there were a series of reforms – political action committees, the PAC reforms. After a while they were no longer reforms, but became huge repositories for special interests that could focus money on incumbent Congress members who sat on the right committees. If you wanted to challenge them, there was no way the PACs would give you money unless you had a poll showing you were winning; and that’s pretty rare for a challenger. So, unseating an incumbent became a real problem.

At the same time, in Maine, the Clean Elections Law came along. The important part of it was matching funds; if your opponent, who was not running a “clean” election, raised more money than you, the State matched those funds up to a generous limit. You could stay competitive up to a point; and then you were on your own. That no longer exists, so there’s very little incentive for a candidate to go Clean Elections on the state level – House or Senate – because you know that all these independent groups are going to start spending big-time.

I talked about how inexpensive my first race was in 1974. There was a 2012 Maine Senate race in Bangor
where the candidates spent $250,000 each for the seat. Do you know how much a senate seat pays? Maybe $13,000 one year, and six or seven thousand the next; so, it certainly wasn’t for the pay. Just think about all the outside money that was pouring into that Senate race! In some ways, Maine is changing its money approach just as Washington is; and it is a very frightening thing to watch.

Parties and Partisanship

I want to read you something, if I may:

“Running for office is not glamorous, it’s hard work and has to be done; and once you’re elected you have to do the work of making the government work.”

I remember when I was in one of those seats that was to be gerrymandered. David Emery, the former Republican congressman, was absolutely brilliant about this. He was ahead of the curve in using computerized redistricting, and proposed new boundaries for my district. I live in Vassalboro on the east side of the Kennebec River. The new district was to be a tiny sliver that ran on the west side of the road down to the bridge in Augusta, took a sharp right across the Calumet Bridge, and then hugged the river up to what is known in Augusta as Sand Hill. It really looked ridiculous, if you could see the thing.

Running for office is not glamorous, it’s hard work and has to be done; and once you’re elected you have to do the work of making the government work. If you organize yourselves into the blue birds vs. the black birds, it won’t make any difference; you’re going to have something that resembles a party, because people must and will organize around those values that Professor Barringer spoke about in his introduction.

Mario Cuomo once observed that, “Campaigning is poetry; governing is prose.” I ran as a Democrat in 1974. I didn’t know why I was a Democrat. After I was elected, I knew I was a Democrat, because that’s when the prose started. The people I most shared values with were Democrats. That did not mean I didn’t have parties, the world would be wonderful.”

Emery played a key role in this process. He was absolutely brilliant about this. He was ahead of the curve in using computerized re-districting, and proposed new boundaries for my district. I live in Vassalboro on the east side of the Kennebec River. The new district was to be a tiny sliver that ran on the west side of the road down to the bridge in Augusta, took a sharp right across the Calumet Bridge, and then hugged the river up to what is known in Augusta as Sand Hill. It really looked ridiculous, if you could see the thing.

I went to the Maine Supreme Court to argue our case against it; and the Chief Justice laughed, because he lived in the district. I said, “Mr. Chief Justice, I believe Mr. Emery’s computer has a virus”, and so the re-districting did not happen. But that was just the beginning. Not that the Democratic party wasn’t very far behind, they wished they had caught up sooner; but I’m sure that’s how they get the districts that they want today in Washington.

I recently had a reunion with college friends from long ago, and one couple lives in Asheville, North Carolina. Asheville is a small community that has become a mecca – a sort of progressive center where they have people retiring there from all over, and they’re very interested in environmental issues and education and all those things. They’re now in a congressional district with the large city of Gastonia, and have zero power and zero votes. So, it’s not just here; it’s what we’re doing now, and we have to be very, very careful.

Maine Government’s Own Shutdown

There are lessons to be learned here. When Maine had its own shutdown, I had just come back to the legislature. I had been there for ten years, left, and came back. I became chair of the Banking and Insurance Committee, right in the middle of what was going on, that so roiled the political temperature in Maine.

Maine’s Worker’s 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 Worker’s Compensation reform. It had nothing to do with the budget, but let me explain Maine’s budget process a bit.

There’s nothing in the Maine Constitution or law that says you have to have a two-thirds vote, a super majority, to pass a budget. However, a Maine law doesn’t take effect until 90 days after you adjourn sine die. Then there’s this pesky thing called the fiscal year, so that means you would have to adjourn sine die 90 days before July 1, leaving unfinished business. Well, that didn’t happen that year, and I will never forget it.

I had watched Speaker John Martin of Aroostook bring the gavel down many times so fast that splinters flew. But when negotiations between the Republicans and the Democrats totally bogged down over the budget and Worker’s Comp reform, that gavel hung in mid-air for what seemed like an eternity.

Whatever one might think of the Speaker, he loved the institution of the Legislature, and did many things to reform it; but he had no idea that partisan brinksmanship would come to such an end; and we went into shutdown mode. It changed me, and it changed my later actions as Speaker. Tents arose in Capital Park, horns blared all night long, the committees of jurisdiction met ‘round the clock with the Chief Executive, Gov. John McKernan.

I don’t know what it’s like in Washington now, I can’t imagine; but I’m sure it’s not pleasant. As the world is watching, you’re doing everything wrong. But I’ll tell you something: it 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 MMIC. Basically, if you don’t hurt people, you don’t pay much; and if you hurt people, you pay more. MMIC is one of the success stories of that horrible shutdown; but it took a terrible toll on everybody.

Several years later, when I became Speaker of the House, there was never an issue like ObamaCare tied to the budget, or some other issue. Governor Angus King was an independent, not a Republican or Democrat, and did not want to be seen as a member of either party. As Republican and Democratic leadership kept meeting with him about his first budget, the minority Republicans in the Senate said, “Well, we’ll need to change this and change that in the budget; and finally the goal post had been moved so many times that it had to come to an end.

The Democrats passed a budget and adjourned sine die; and Governor King immediately called us back into session, one hour later. This meant that that budget was going to take effect even though it was a partisan, majority budget. This act became very frightening to many, especially Republicans. When I became Senate President, they said, “Oh, no! Is she going to do that to us again?” And just the fact that it could be done again made people work together, better. By the way, the budget that had passed was called a majority budget, and more than two-thirds of it was exactly what both sides had agreed to.

Remember this: the Maine legislature prides itself on unanimous reports from its committees. We work on committees, 13 men and women from all over the state; and you’re a failure as chair if you produce a divided report, you’re a success if you can find agreement. There’s a long history of compromise in the Maine Legislature. I love the institution.

Maine Fishbowl Politics

I want to talk about decorum, because I think it is very important. When I was first elected to it, my mentor was a Republican, Bennett Katz of Augusta. He was fighting the battle of equal educational opportunity all across the state; but really it was about taxes. The bill was called LD 1994. What Katz said was, “It doesn’t matter where you live in the State of Maine, your kids have the right to an equal education.” Well, there was a group that rose up called Maine Freedom Fighters; and if you think the Tea Party is angry, they were very angry!

The Maine Freedom Fighters came from everywhere to the bill’s hearing, saying that towns like Castine and other places should not be required to pay so much; they didn’t have the kids, so why should their property taxes be the equalizer?” And I will tell you this, lest we think that Maine is always peaceful and quiet: at hearings on
this bill, legislators had their windshields broken, people disliked the idea so much. Katz held his ground, however, and modified the bill to try and gain support. Maine tries so hard to make sure that people from Millinocket to Cape Elizabeth get access to good education.

There’s also a history of the voters repealing things that happen in the Maine Legislature, and it has an impact on what happens here. During my time as Senate President, we passed a tax reform bill that the Wall Street Journal called “The Maine Miracle.” We were pretty happy about that, because we needed some tax reform at the time; but the next thing we knew, there was a citizens referendum that repealed it!

We passed some funding for healthcare reforms so that children might have the healthcare they need. We wanted to pay for it with a tax on alcohol. Anheuser-Busch didn’t like that very much, and I saw a political ad on television that they ran against this effort, because any one state that broke the barrier would set a bad precedent for other states. A citizens’ referendum resulted and, again, the law was repealed.

Legislators in Maine work in this big fish bowl; and I fight for that opportunity to have a people’s referendum. We saw one on Equality in Marriage, and how that started to change things, and others. Some of things you work on are repealed, and some things that you work on succeed. When I ran for governor in 2010, there was so much malaise across the land. I think now about how many people were so miserable – they didn’t have their jobs, their incomes were not increasing, they didn’t know where they were going to get healthcare. I wanted to look at the successes because many of the attack ads then were, “Look at what 30 years of Democratic rule has done to the State of Maine.”

30 Years of Democratic Rule

Let me tell you some of the things we did over several decades, on my watch. We achieved improved and more affordable educational opportunities. We created scholarships, vocational programs, historic tax credits to help us preserve our heritage, affordable housing, percent-for-art, and access to healthcare, especially for children. We cleaned up our rivers and our air. Research and development prospered for the very first time. We became the first state in the country to fund Head Start.

School breakfasts for the needy: I worked on this as Speaker, and was criticized, because, “If mom would just get out of bed, these children wouldn’t be hungry.” Transitions to work: in fact, my daughter chaired the Health and Institutional Services Committee when she was a single mom, herself, and wanted to help people go to work, get the skills they need, the daycare they need, the job training, the things that matter. We’re going to have a new courthouse in Kennebec County because people didn’t buckle when things were tough, because they knew they needed to invest in roads and bridges and civic infrastructure for the future!

When I heard the first debate about adding sexual orientation to the Maine Human Rights Act, it was so crude and so bad that the Speaker of the House had to clear the chamber of children; he did not want them to be exposed to that kind of rhetoric. Later, when I presided over the debate as Speaker, Maine’s first openly gay House member spoke about why the bill was important to him; and anybody who voted against it had to explain why! The table had turned, because the people of Maine had begun to speak out and to learn; it was absolutely amazing when that happened.

There are things I tried and didn’t get very far on; but I’m not sorry. I was pilloried for trying to get sick pay for moms and dads who worked, when they needed to take a day off to take care of their kids. Even the businesses that offered this were afraid that my proposal “would be another mandate from the State.” So, that failed. The one thing I really wanted to do as Speaker of the House – and so, hopefully, someone else will do it one day – is the State of Georgia’s Hope Scholarship Program.

Of course, Georgians gamble more than we did then, they had a big lottery fund, and their every student got four years of college at State expense. I don’t think they still have it, because times have been tough everywhere; but our proposal was so simple and paired down, we became the “but-for” piece. That is, you still had to get your Pell grants and your student aid. The piece we proposed was still missing, because we had found that for so many Maine students, it wasn’t lack of aspirations that kept them from college, it was lack of money; and their parents did not want to borrow, because they had been brought up not to borrow.

**Enough Is Enough!**

At any rate, these and other things remain to be done, for others still to do. I want Washington to get its act together, so it can learn from Maine and it can work with Maine. I have a passion for politics and for making gov-
ernment work. I never went into it for money; you can ask my family, because there’s no money there. I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to make life better for the kids in our community. I wanted to make education better. And if we’re going to right this ship of state that is now in a lot of trouble, as I always told our party caucus, “Politics is not a spectator sport.” You’re just going to have to step up and say – as the United States Senate chaplain told them yesterday – “Enough is enough!” Enough is enough because I believe that the party is not over.

I believe that we can govern ourselves; but we’re going to have to make some extraordinarily important reforms. No one knows how to get money totally out of politics, it has always been there; but we need a whole lot more disclosure. No one should be able to call themselves “Citizens for a Better Government” or “Citizens Who Like Clean Air,” when they are paying for something totally different. Who are they? With disclosure you can know; then, you can educate yourself. If your candidate is totally bought and paid for by a certain group or team – if you know – then it’s your responsibility to make a decision. I don’t know how to get it out any other way except by disclosure, information, and education.

I am often asked about being in legislative leadership and a House Speaker or a Senate President. I think the most important training I ever had for those jobs was being a mom. You learn there that there’s a time to say no; that there’s a time to really listen; that you can’t reward bad behavior; and you take risks for their benefit. Of course, they don’t always appreciate it until later."

“The most important training I ever had for (leadership) was being a mom. You learn there that there’s a time to say no; that there’s a time to really listen; that you can’t reward bad behavior; and you take risks for their benefit. Of course, they don’t always appreciate it until later. Being a mom and a teacher were extraordinarily important in shaping my views. I’m so honored to have been in leadership posts. You never see yourself as “the woman Speaker” or “the woman President,” as I see my many of my women colleagues here today. We just did our jobs. I loved working with Hannah. She reminded me of youth

Q & A

**Question:** Libby, you have held the top position in both the Maine House and Senate. The chambers differ greatly in size, one having 151 members, the other just 35. Could you comment on the differences you found between the two chambers and their decision making? Is one more inclined to operate in a bipartisan fashion than the other? Or, from your experience, is there no real difference in this regard?

**MITCHELL:** I honestly think a lot depends on the leadership and the approach they bring. When I was Senate President, my House colleague was the youngest woman Speaker in the country, Hannah Pingree of North Haven. I loved working with Hannah. She reminded me of youthful thinking; and she could text everybody, and I couldn’t do that at the time. More importantly, she really worked to join the two chambers; we respected one another and were able to bring them together. Democrats in the House don’t always agree with Democrats in the Senate, while Republicans usually agree. Our job was to bridge the divide. The hallway between the two chambers can be quite long, so we made a special effort to overcome that.

Let me tell you how I managed the House. There are 151 members of the House; and when I was Speaker, at least 90 or so were Democrats. How do you lead a caucus of that size? I broke them down into groups, and brought
them into the Speaker’s office and made them part of the conversation in smaller groups. In the Senate, there are 35 members and each is so special and knows everything, right? We all do. But it was still the same focus. You allow people to talk and be heard.

I’ll tell you a quick story, if I may. The Equality in Marriage issue was one of the most extraordinary and challenging times in my tenure. I had not taken a strong position on it because I wanted my caucus to agree on a bill without a referendum attached, which the advocates thought most important. We came right up to the day before the Judiciary Committee was to vote on the bill and send it to the full chamber. I recessed the Senate and invited all the members of my caucus to my office, where we sat down, like in a living room, and talked for almost two hours. It was all about member’s own experiences, about their relatives, about how they had been treated; it was almost like a revival meeting. It was extraordinary how people were able to talk in a private room about these very difficult things.

My Assistant Majority Leader at the time is Catholic and had been threatened with excommunication. She was really worried about what to do, because she believed in her heart that the bill was the right thing to do. By the time we left, we had a totally unanimous caucus. When the Judiciary Committee members voted on the bill, they voted together, when they had not been united before. One of my Republican colleagues remarked to me, “I don’t know what you do to people in your office. I had some of their votes when they went in there; and when they came out, I didn’t.” I didn’t do anything. I allowed the caucus members to have the space and the opportunity to talk about this gravely important, tough political issue.

And I will tell you this: not one single town in my Senate District had ever supported the issue. So, it was difficult for legislators, it wasn’t like getting re-elected at any cost, things like you see in Washington today. It was, “What are the values that we share, that we stand for? And if I don’t get re-elected, so be it, because this value trumps being re-elected.”

**Question:** I supported you for governor in 2010. As things progressed, however, I decided at the last minute to vote for Eliot Cutler, to spare us Paul LePage. If we had Portland’s system of ranked-choice voting, I could have given you my first choice vote and Cutler my second, and the outcome would have been different, much better. Your thoughts?

**MITCHELL:** I have no problem with the ranked-choice voting, I think that we need reforms like that. 2010 was an aberration. If you think money in politics doesn’t matter, we can have a little chat about that. Three weeks out from Election Day, a poll was taken by the Maine Education Association, and we were even with LePage. Then, as you know, the momentum band wagon started rolling the other way. We knew that; and I am always amazed at the people who say I should have dropped out. How does one drop out when you are the nominee of the party? But I get that from people who don’t understand politics.

I mean you couldn’t drop out. Your name is on the ballot, and the ballot is printed. If I had dropped out, what would I have done? Who would I have endorsed? I didn’t share the views of either of my opponents. So, you stay there. But it’s difficult to hear people say, “You should’ve dropped out.” Nobody should have dropped out, you can’t. You can only drop out before the ballots are printed.

At any rate, ranked-choice voting might have helped; but I don’t think everybody who voted early for me wished they could have gotten their vote back. Some probably did, but I wouldn’t take that opportunity away from Maine people, they love early voting. Voting on Election Day is a cherished thing here; and so is registering to vote on Election Day, and that is something that’s being taken away in some of the states. I prefer reforms that show positive thinking – like ranked-choice voting – as opposed to taking away registration on Election Day, and that sort of thing.

**Question:** Let me follow up on that question, if I may. You ran as a Clean Elections candidate. Did that hurt you financially, especially toward the end of the race?

**MITCHELL:** There was a limited amount of money I could have under Clean Elections; and as you know, a Clean Election candidate cannot coordinate with party or PAC groups, there are rules against coordinating with anybody. I discovered an interesting thing about this, however, one that I hope scholars will think about it.

In our system of politics, people have only so many ways to participate. There are shoe leather, knocking on doors, making phone calls, signing up for coffees, and that sort of thing; and there’s also the giving of money. I’m not talking about the Koch brothers-scale of money. I’m talking about $50, $100, $2,000, or whatever. I never called or cultivated the well-off opinion makers in Maine who normally participate financially, because I wasn’t raising money at all. As a result, many of them thought we
wber't doing anything. We were doing other things, but we weren’t calling and keeping them in the loop, because there was only so much time in the day. I wasn’t able to cultivate the opinion makers who tell you whether you’re running a good campaign or not.

I don’t know that I could have run without Clean Elections, however. It opened the door for people who aren’t multi-millionaires, so I do believe in Clean Elections; but there have to be some reforms if it’s going to work. You can’t send people to run with their hands tied behind their back. They have to have the same financial capability, like the matching funds. When the U.S. Supreme Court removed Arizona’s Clean Elections matching funds, they gutted it, because that was the disincentive for people to go out and raise a lot of money. When they raised money, you got money, so why would they bother? That was the guts of it, and since Maine’s law was modeled on Arizona’s, we lost that piece. If you don’t have matching funds, it changes everything. It’s the same thing with the Citizens United decision: what a disgrace, in terms of unleashing the flood gates of uncontrolled money that you don’t know the source of!

“Life is all about being full of passion, passion for making Maine a better place, for making the country a better place; and those are the kinds of elected officials you should send to office.”

Qution: Given the state of political polarization now, are there any special advantages in electing an “independent” for governor or other state office?

MITCHELL: Well, if you look at Angus King, a successful and popular independent governor, who is now a United States Senator, he’s had to pick a side since his election. It’s not based on whether he wants to be a Democrat or a Republican; but he doesn’t like the shutdown. He wants to keep government running, and he’s trying to use his independence to say that. When push comes to shove, you have to be able to govern; and he had to do the same thing with us when there was a budget threat. He had to work with one party or the other.

You have to make decisions; and if you didn’t organize either as a party or some other mechanism, there would be total chaos. Who’s going to run the train? Who’s going to print the bills? In Washington, the Speaker of the House has the power to say that you can or cannot vote on a bill. I think that’s ridiculous. In Maine, we don’t look at things as they do. Every single bill has to have a hearing. If you think the Maine Speaker could keep anything off the floor, you are mistaken. So, there are rules and structures that are bad for government.

Whether you’re an independent or not, you are going to have to govern with a party; and parties are a simple shorthand for shared values. What you want to know is, “What does the independent stand for? What are his values or her values?” You have to govern with a party, and parties don’t always get along. When I was Speaker, I had a faction in the Democratic caucus called the 207 group. They would make the Tea Party blush, because they felt that strongly about their conservative values. But we worked with them, not around them. We tried to include them, even though they went off into their corner to strategize and politicize.

I don’t see anything magic about being independent. In fact, being Speaker of the House is like herding cats. They’re all independent. I don’t know where the notion came from that they walk like lemmings over a cliff, except I see that in Washington today, so I guess that’s where it came from.

Question: The Founders closed the windows and suffered the summer heat of 1788 so they could argue, debate, and compromise without interference. Today the role of the media includes covering every time a politician sneezes, and politicians argue through the media, itself. Can you address how the media makes compromise more difficult today?

MITCHELL: I told you our story about Equality in Marriage. That was an opportunity to speak without the media repeating everything you said while you were trying to get to a place of comfort with your vote. On the other hand, in our very open society, the last thing I would want is to shut people out. The more informed people are, the better. I read a fascinating article about a Republican Congressman who uttered the word “compromise” not long ago; and immediately it went to Rush Limbaugh, and Rush ecorated him, and he apologized and said he would never use that word again. Those things are very troubling.

This is what happened to us with the alcohol tax, when we tried to fund healthcare for kids. Now, who cared about paying an extra nickel on a six-pack of beer? But this wasn’t the message the lobbyists gave out: “Those crazy Democrats will tax anything that moves, so you’ve got to stop them now before they go too far!” It’s that kind of coverage that makes progress hard; but I would never take away the democratic right to know everything that’s going on. You know, technology is here; I just want to use it better. I don’t want to use it to create gerrymandered districts. I don’t want to use it to empower the lobbyists. I would like to use it to empower the citizens, because they have the same power if they will just take it back.
**Question:** In his writings on Maine politics in the 1980’s, our co-host for this series, Dick Barringer, developed an idea he referred to as the Two Maine’s. Many academics and others found the concept a useful way of understanding Maine politics and economics. The notion of the Two Maine’s pointed to a widening gap in the 1980’s between the fairly prosperous counties along the southern Maine coast that were experiencing much in-migration from southern New England, and the state’s northern and eastern counties that were noticeably less well-off. Could you comment on this idea, specifically: how relevant is it today to talk about the Two Maine’s in discussing our politics and economy?

**MITCHELL:** I would probably call it three or four Maine’s, because there are economic disparities all over Maine, and Maine is no different from other states in this regard. Go to New York, go to Virginia. There are pockets of poverty in every state and then there’s the more affluent, and what do you do with that? It’s a policy question. Policymakers have tried to invest in research and development. They have tried to do more about sustainable agriculture in northern Maine. In fact, one young man up there says, “We can grow our beef cattle, but there’s no place to process the beef;” so, hmm, why don’t we build a processing plant. As you will recall, when the dairy farmers started talking milk in terms of becoming self-sufficient, they created their own organic cooperative, MOO-Milk. There’s also been an effort to try to re-do the Limestone Air Force Base, lots of things have been put up there. Downeast, there’s the blueberries; and trying to create wind farms.

As I drive to any place now, it’s the natural gas pipeline, and it takes you an extra hour to go from point A to point B. It’s exciting because it’s economic growth. I keep wondering, though, did the State of Maine get anything for the right-of-way that’s being used by these gas companies, because that was our plan for alternative energy? In fact Peter Vigue of Cianbro first suggested that. Why don’t we sell or lease the right-of-way. Well, we own the road. Wind energy is still important. Alternative energy, Maine can be a producer of that.

**Question:** When you were Senate President and Hannah Pingree was Speaker of the House, it was the only time in Maine history that two women were running the Legislature. Did it make a difference?

**MITCHELL:** I don’t know that it was because we were women. We shared the same values. We wanted it to be successful. We wanted to leave having accomplished things. Hannah was a huge leader on environmental issues and alternative energies, but also in getting that poison out of baby sippy-cups; believe it or not, that was controversial for a while.

We shared values and we also approached it the same way. We had dinner with our Republican colleagues in leadership at least every other week, and we really liked them. They are good friends, and that was our style. We were collaborative, we cared about the House and the Senate, and we cared about our Republican colleagues. That’s the tone we set. We got in there to get something done, and people began to realize there was no effort to do a majority budget. Remember, I was the Queen of the Majority Budget, and people didn’t trust me; but once they understood that was not the issue, we were able to work together.

“Whether you’re an independent or not, you are going to have to govern with a party; and parties are a simple shorthand for shared values. What you want to know is, “What does the independent stand for? What are his values or her values?”

**Question:** Occasionally there’s an argument in Maine over the size and cost of the Maine House of Representatives – that it’s too large, too expensive. Do you have any thoughts about whether the House is about the right size, or whether it should be reduced in number?

**MITCHELL:** This reminds me of a Morris Udall quote, “Them’s my views; and if you don’t like them, I’ll change them.” I have probably voted on both sides of this issue, because I kept thinking about it in different ways. Probably it could be smaller, and I think that was my most recent political posture; though not a lot smaller, because one of the things that kept us from being like Washington was being “up close and personal,” because your constituents can say, “No, no, don’t do that.”

It’s a Two Maine’s issue, too. Every time you shrink the size of the House, the people in northern Maine feel disenfranchised – if you think how far they have to drive, from downeast or western Maine. Whereas for Portland, maybe you would get one less representative, so that becomes the issue. How do you make people feel that this is their government? It doesn’t really cost a lot. You know how little legislators make.

Whether or not you have a smaller House, one good thing we have is the nonpartisan professional staff. This was a reform the Maine Legislature made in the 1970s, and it has made a lot of difference. The old Augusta House lobbyists were bringing over their own drafts of legislation – and why not, it was easy to do. That doesn’t exist now because you can go to an independent, thinking
person who can tell you, “If you do this, it has these consequences. If you do something else, it has others.” So, I might reduce the House some; but it’s not about saving money, it’s just because people perceive it as being too heavy with representatives.

**Question:** There seem to be far fewer business people in the Legislature today than there were, say, 30 or 40 years ago; many distinguished people from the private sector served in and became leaders of the Legislature then. Does the Legislature enjoy the same respect today within the private sector? Has their respect for the institution, itself, changed?

**MITCHELL:** I’m not sure why it has. I want to describe the respect for the institution 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.

I once got a report that a committee member was being very rude to people who had come to make a statement to their elected representatives. He was walking around, slamming doors, and engaging in behavior not acceptable to me. I called this representative into my office, looked at him, and said, “I’ve heard some really bad things about your behavior. I put you on that committee and I can take you off.” I didn’t really want to. He disarmed me totally, however, with his great sense of humor. He said, “I’m so sorry, Speaker Mitchell. I had a brat attack”. And so I laughed and it never happened again. These were my expectations of committees, and I carried them through to the Senate. If members of committees mistreated the public or mistreated their responsibilities, I would call them out for it; and Hannah would do the same thing.

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. E.J. Dionne once wrote that principled partisanship means, “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.

We don’t call each other names and say, “You’re not worthy of being in the Legislature, because you’re not educated enough.” I respect the people around me; and when we demand that kind of respect as leaders, it goes out to everybody, whether you’re a business person or a college student serving in the Legislature. What you bring to the process is way more important than what your background is!

Thank you very much. (Applause)