Introduction

Peter Mills is the senior member of one of Maine’s most distinguished and accomplished families; and I must thank his younger brother, Paul, for much of this introduction. Just imagine, if you will, a Christian family blessed with two brilliant sons, one Peter and one Paul. What a family dynamic that must have set up! Then there were two daughters, as well; but more about that later.

So far as is known, the Mills family is one of just two families in all Maine history who sent three generations of sons, with the very same name, to serve in the Maine Senate. Peter’s grandfather whose name he bears served two terms in the Maine Senate, representing Hancock County. His father, whose name he also bears, served two terms in the Maine Senate before being appointed U.S. Attorney for Maine by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, where he served for 16 years. Peter, himself, using his several forbears’ name to excellent advantage, has served no fewer than six terms in the Maine Senate, where he distinguished himself with a principled, pragmatic, and bipartisan approach to the challenges facing Maine.

Can any of you tell me the other Maine family that has sent three generations to the Maine Senate, with the very same name? Any guesses? Well, it is the Collins family of Caribou, none other than that of Maine’s senior U.S. Senator, the much admired Susan Collins. Her great-great grandfather, Samuel W. Collins, a Democrat, went to the Maine Senate; as did her grandfather Samuel W. Collins, a Republican; as did her uncle, Samuel W. Collins; and, indeed, as did her own father and my personal friend, Donald Collins. Very fine, practical, and accomplished County men, one in all.

Peter Mills has a number of distinguished family members of his own in service to Maine. His wife, Nancy, is a Justice of the Maine Superior Court. His sister Janet has served as the first elected female district attorney in Maine history, and in the Maine House of Representatives; today she is Maine’s Attorney General. His sister Dora, a physician, served as Maine’s Director of Public Health in the administrations of governors Angus King and John Baldacci; and is now Vice-President of the University of
New England. So we have sisters in the family, as well, Janet and Dora; I’m surprised their parents didn’t name them Mary and Martha.

His brother Paul, my teacher in all this, continues to “hold down the fort” as an attorney in private practice in Farmington, where he is widely known for his shrewd and perceptive writings on Maine political history and public affairs. Paul also has moderated more than 140 town meetings in Franklin and Somerset Counties, where he remains, as he likes to say, “undefeated in his perpetual quest for minor public office, 140 times without a single defeat.”

Today, Peter Mills is executive director of the Maine Turnpike Authority. Because of his family’s own Aroostook roots, Peter claims to be related as a very distant cousin to virtually every citizen of Maine. For example, he’s a distant cousin to Kay Rand of Ashland, U.S. Senator Angus King’s Chief of Staff in Washington D.C.; and a distant cousin to Linda Greenlaw, the famous offshore fishing boat captain and author. This proves the case, of course, that if you and your family will spend a little time in Aroostook County, you will become related to everyone else in Maine within three generations. Peter may even be related to each of you here today.

It is my great personal pleasure to introduce a good friend and genuine Maine hero in the continuing quest for practical and useful government for all Maine people, S. Peter Mills, III, of Cornville and Portland, Maine. (R.B.)

PETER MILLS: It is impossible for me to begin without saying a few words about this series. Dick Barringer and Ken Palmer have done yeoman’s work putting it together. I have listened to all of the preceding talks and been thrilled with them.

I need to also point out that it is very easy for those of us in politics to talk about all the problems we face. Indeed, many Maine people start out in politics by writing a book. Eliot Cutler has written one recently. Angus King wrote one. Others have written them, saying, “Here’s the situation.” Without being critical of any one of these, I find that it’s very common to rehearse with graphs and charts all of the problems that this state and the country face; and when you get to the last chapter, to find out what the remedy is, they sometimes come up a little short.

Joseph McDonnell, Dean of the College that houses the Muskie School, just this past week wrote a very fine piece in the Portland Press Herald, reminding us of the day in 1950 when Sen. Margaret Chase Smith took on the communist-baiting Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. I was seven years old. I had campaigned with Margaret in 1948, my earliest memory of politics, in the front seat of a Chevrolet coupe that my father drove. I can remember being allowed to sit in the front seat because in a Chevy coupe, if you were five years old and you sat in the back, you could see nothing, the windows were so small; and Margaret insisted that my father permit her to ride in the rear and me up front.

There are Republicans of that character and calibre even today in government. We have seen examples of how some have responded recently in the U.S. Senate; and we see the likes of them today in the Maine Legislature, as well. Do not despair for the future of the Republican Party!

A Creature of True Democracy

When you get to be 70 years old, as I did last June, you begin to watch movies like The Bucket List, where two old codgers begin to dream up things they might like to do before they kick the bucket. I’m a little more fond of thinking about my bucket list in reverse. In other words, let’s suppose the grim reaper came by to see me and said, “Mr. Mills, I have some bad news. We’re about to take you away, tomorrow; you have but another day. That’s the bad news. The good news is, for reasons completely not understood by me, my superiors have decided that you should have until tomorrow to tell us what it is that you want to do up there for the rest of eternity. When I come back for you tomorrow, I would like your decision.”

Well, it sets you to thinking, doesn’t it? Would you like to spend your time listening to Brandenburg concertos at Merrill Hall; or maybe watching Bob Dylan and Joan Baez one more time sing that duet, Forever Young, at the State Theater. Would you like to be seated at your favorite banquette at Back Bay Grill, or sailing down Eggemoggin Reach with your grandchildren in a boat and a light breeze on the starb’d quarter? Lots of things? (The idea of being entertained by 70 virgins has never appealed to me. I think they would grow old. At least, I think my affiliation would be unproductive and somewhat boring after a while.)

I can tell you what my answer would be without equivocation. I would choose to be injected as a member of the Maine Legislature – and Maine in particular – during the last three weeks of each legislative session. I have had 16 of these experiences, and I have never in my life felt more intensely alive, more useful, more engaged, more
thrilled with my life, than to spend that time playing a

game of bridge with 185 other players, being lobbied all
the way into the men’s room, sometimes by female lobby-

ists, people tugging at your sleeve all the while.

It’s an ego bath of sorts, everybody wants your attention
and vote. You’re required to stand up on short notice, some-
times with no preparation, to argue vehemently a cause that
you may believe in or oppose. It is extremely intense, and
there is nothing in my life that has ever made me feel quite
so alive as going through it. I would choose to do that for as
long as you would put me into the environment.

I fell in love with the Maine House and Senate back
when I did some lobbying for the Maine Trial Lawyers
Association, as its president. I really wasn’t the lobbyist,
we had a very fine one, named Dale Thistle, and he was
introducing me to the Legislature. I had very little expe-
rience with lobbying, and was brought down because
one of the bills we were concerned with needed to be de-
feated. Dale had been lobbying it all session. Toward the
end, the bills are flying back and forth and amendments
are being written, and there’s chaos in the building. I was
sitting up in the back of the House gallery, watching this
bill being debated, discussed, and it passed! I’m looking
at my lobbyist Dale and getting worried. He grabs me by
the arm and says, “We’re going to kill it in the Senate!”

Down we went running to the Senate chamber; and
shortly after we got there, the bill arrived and came up
for the vote. The bell started ringing for a roll call vote,
we’re counting the votes on the board, and it comes out
tied, 17 to 17. I’m on tenterhooks, the bell is ringing,
and then one of the senators who had been busy in com-
mittee comes striding into the back of the room. Sen.
Bonnie Titcomb (now Lewis) – five foot ten, shoulders
back, head high – stood behind her seat, looked up to see
what the issue was, pressed the button, and voted “Nay!”
Bang! Down came the Senate president’s gavel, and the
bill was dead and gone! What an experience! I’ve seldom
seen anything quite so dramatic. And that’s the way it is
in the Maine Legislature.

It isn’t that way in the New York State Assembly. It is
not that way in other so-called democratic institutions.
The Maine legislature is and continues to be a creature
of true democracy. Every member gets to propose an
amendment if he or she wishes it. There is no 60 vote
cold-cloture. There is no partisan gerrymandering of dis-

tricts, because the State Supreme Court will intervene
and fix it objectively, as they have on occasion. We’re
very, very lucky in Maine to have the benefit of a true
democracy in action. It is a thrill, truly, the biggest thrill
of my life to have been part of it.

When I get done at the Maine Turnpike Authority, and
if the people of Somerset County would have me back, I
would go back in a heart-beat; and I would recommend
it to any of you.

It’s not easy to get there. I remember having been in
the Legislature for 12 years when I ran for governor and
lost. The people of Somerset County were kind enough
to nominate me again for my Senate seat, and I had on
occasion lost the little town of Moscow. Moscow had a
number of Democrats and they were a tough audience for
me. I remember going around to all the back roads and

houses; I went down roads that no politician had ever
been down before. I came to one house with a skidder
in the dooryard, knocked on the door, and said: “Hi, I’m
Peter Mills. I’m running for the State Senate, would love
to have your vote”. And the man looked at me and said,
“Well, you’ve got it. Anybody is better than that idiot
we’ve had there for 12 years!” (Laughter)

The Power of Narrative

One of the things wrong with our politicians today –
myself included – is that they often fail to appreciate the
power of personal narrative and storytelling as much as
they should.

When I look back at George Mitchell’s run for Gov-
ernor in 1974, and at Angus King’s run in 1994, which
he just barely won, I think that both of these very smart
people were at that time responding to questions with
fabulous policy answers, but weren’t doing so good a job
as they now do at engaging with the public on a personal
level.

One of the things wrong with our politicians
today is that they often fail to appreciate the
power of personal narrative and storytelling.
Storytelling is what gets your policy over the
top.”

When George Mitchell ran in 1974, someone would ask
him a question about education reform or welfare fraud or
something, and he would offer a six-point program and
lay it right out for you; and those of us who enjoy that sort
of thing would say, “God, that man is on top of the issue.”
Yet Jim Longley, who beat him, had a little narrative story
of his own. He had a life narrative, and sort of a beady-
eyed, single mission; and he won. Gov. Paul LePage did
this to me. He came into the primary with a personal nar-

rative – not just the ability to tell a story, but to be one.
You’ve seen the evidence of this here, in the last several
weeks. George Mitchell is one of the most gifted orators
you’ve ever heard and he’s not lost an election since, all
because he knows how to tell his stories and personify it.
And Angus, of course, is one of our finest communicators.
I’ve often thought that Southern politicians are best at
this. There’s one story that I’ve always enjoyed telling.
James Carville, the rarin’ Cajun, the Democratic consultant who grew extremely frustrated about the Republican juggernaut to repeal the estate tax. At some point, he said, “If we Democrats can’t tax a few dead Republicans, we ought to give up and call ourselves the pro-choice party, because that’s all the dang issue we’ve got left.” And Huey Long, his stories are equally fascinating. He was always in danger of assassination because he was such a populist, and was assassinated at age 42. He would say, “If I die, please bury me back in Winn Parish, so I can continue to participate in local politics”.

It’s true of the Legislature and it’s true of politics generally. One of my closest friends is fond of saying that the plural of anecdote is policy; storytelling is what gets your policy over the edge, over the top. My favorite storyteller in Maine was Republican Eddie Dexter of Kingfield, who went into the woods at age 12 and later ran both successfully and unsuccessfully for the House. Whenever he stood up and was recognized to speak, there was a hush in the chamber. People came in from their coffee clutches and listened. He was quite fond of chastising the Democrats because they were always trying to ingratiate themselves with small business; and making proposals that on the surface were friendly to small business, but in subtle ways damaging to them.

Eddie would stand up and say, “These Democrats come in and talk about being friendly to small business; they remind me of my granddaughter. I gave her a kitten once, and when I came into the living room, I heard this kitten scre-e-eching. And I said, ‘Katie, what are you doing to that little kitten?’ She was holding the kitty by his neck, strangling him. And she says, ‘Oh, Grandaddy, I’m just loving this little kitten to death!’ ”

On a more serious note, I want to get to some remedies, because I think this is what this lecture series needs at this point. Before I get there, let me identify what I think are the major problems with our politics today. I would identify two that are very broad and encompass many of things that were articulated by our previous speakers.

The New American Plutocracy

The first thing I’m bothered by is the fact that this country is once again a plutocracy. It isn’t that we are in danger of having money run the show; money is running the show. We’re already there. This country has survived similar periods in its history. From the time of the Civil War until the onset of the Great Depression, we were a plutocracy. National policy was run in large measure by the trusts, by large companies and corporations, and by secret money and not-so-secret money; and we are there once again.

The Clean Elections system has essentially been gutted by the lack of matching funds available. The U.S. Supreme Court has said that corporations are essentially the same as persons, and that money is roughly the equivalent of speech. Because this comes down on high from the Supreme Court, trying to figure out a remedy is very difficult.

You can consider a citizens’ campaign to launch a constitutional amendment, which is very difficult to get through the House and the Senate; or you can say to yourself, “As life goes on, maybe the composition of the Supreme Court will change over the next 30 or 40 years” – the same way it changed dramatically on the issue of race, with the overturning of *Plessey v. Ferguson* in 1954, or on issues relating to gay marriage. The Supreme Court is made up of human beings, and they have the capacity to see things differently, as generations pass; but that’s a long-range prospect, a long way off.

If there is a remedy for the money-in-politics issue, it is to insist on laws that require full disclosure. The court has not said that a law that requires disclosure is inappropriate. Let’s at least get the money out in the open and be patent about it. When my father campaigned for office in the ’50s, his idea of a strenuous campaign was to buy 500 pencils with his name on them, stick them in a coffee cup on the counter at his law office, and have people pick them up as they came in for counsel.

Then we went through phases in the 1970s and ’80s when the Democrats taught us Republicans how to go door-to-door; that personal contact was essential; that even if you’re a lawyer or a businessman or an insurance agent or whatever, you have to get out from behind the oak desk in your office, and go find out where your clients, your customers, your constituents actually live. For a long time, many of us thought “Oh, goodness, that’s hard work!” Well, now we know that it’s required, and maybe you even have to go twice to every door.

You may also need $100,000 or more to win a Senate race in this State, if you’re in a real contest. That’s very discouraging, and I don’t think it is a partisan thing. My observation over the years is that the money flows to the party that’s in ascendancy; and right now the Democrats are in ascendancy in Maine, in both the House and Senate. Most intelligent lobbyists think that the money in the next campaigns will flow into the Democratic side of things, because they want to be there to influence the leadership, whoever leads the Legislature.
The Vexing Public Debt

The other problem is more of a policy than a political challenge, though I cannot distinguish between the two on this issue. I don’t at all admire how the Tea Party expresses its views on most issues; but I can tell you without equivocation, they are on to something when it comes to the public debt. I’m not just talking about the budget deficit that is being run up in Washington; frankly, that is small potatoes compared to the rest of it, looking ahead.

Someone has estimated that the unfunded liability for Medicare to provide health insurance for people my age and for many of you is five times as big as the challenge that we all recognize in Social Security, another unfunded liability. We have public pensions in some state governments that are unfunded to the tune of several billion dollars. Across the nation, the unfunded liability in state governments is several trillions of dollars. What drives a lot of this is healthcare, which now costs some 17 percent of our gross national product. Most civilized nations are able to get by and do very well by contributing nine or ten percent, and they have better outcomes!

When I was a kid, fifteen years old, and got my driver’s license, the gas tax was 50 percent of the price of gasoline. It was eleven cents per gallon, state and federal combined, and you could buy gas for 22 cents. Today the gas tax is about 50 cents in Maine, and the price of gas is $3.50 to $4 a gallon. The infrastructure that our parents and grandparents built for us – our roads, highway, bridges, water treatment plants, sewer treatment plants – are all lapsing into obsolescence; and we don’t have the revenue to keep them in good repair.

On a wide variety of fronts, we are incurring — what? “Debt” isn’t the right word! What we’re doing is transferring obligations on to the backs of our children and grandchildren across the board, largely in healthcare but also in finance, tax policy, and many other settings. This wouldn’t be so bad if we could afford to pay for everything that we need to have done; but we have limits. Even a rich country like the U.S. and a moderately well-off state like Maine have limitations on what the public sector can choose and be able to do.

All of this money we’re spending on Medicare and healthcare and Social Security for people like me is money that the public sector should be spending on five year-olds who can’t vote. Our children are in trouble; we’re not doing enough for them.

When I turned 17, I took an exam given by the U.S. Navy, and they gave me a scholarship to pay my way to Harvard College, and I had to agree to serve in the Navy, which I did for five years. When I got out, I went to law school here on the GI Bill. My wife went through law school. I had two children courtesy of the Navy, which I did for five years. When I got out, I went to law school here on the GI Bill. My wife went through law school. I had two children courtesy of the Navy. The time I was 30, I had a great job downtown working for Richardson Hildreth and Troubh, a nice law firm. I had no debt and two kids, and my wife and I both had law degrees – not bad!

How many of your children, how many young people at age 30 do you know who are as favored as I was by the society we had going for us in the ’60s? Not many. We’re cheating our kids, and I’m disturbed by it. I didn’t take my Social Security check until five months ago. I guess Governor Paul LePage would say, “Well, Mills, you’re on welfare now.” He’s right. I’m not foolish enough to take it; but on the other hand, shouldn’t we be thinking about this horrible imbalance between those from age 50 and above, and those age 40 and below, and particularly our children?

It is also said that illiteracy is eradicable, in the same sense that polio is. Almost any child can be taught to read, because the techniques that are available now are so wonderfully sophisticated. A teacher with proper training can bestow the gift of reading upon a child, yet we have illiteracy in third graders. When they can’t read in the third grade, they are losing out not only in literature and reading, but in math, in social studies, and in everything else that has to come to them through the printed word.

In the meantime, people over the age of 65 in our society are very, very well represented in Congress and in state government. We all vote, and we’re doing quite well in my observation. It isn’t that we don’t have some unmet needs, we do; but the unmet needs of the young are truly extraordinary in my view, compared with the rest of the population. And it doesn’t leave off in childhood. We’re having kids graduate from the University of Maine owing $50,000 and $60,000; and people graduating from medical school owing $150,000 and $200,000.

“All of this money we’re spending on Medicare and healthcare and Social Security for people like me is money that the public sector should be spending on five year-olds who can’t vote. Our children are in trouble; we’re not doing enough for them.”
If I had to suggest something tangible, I’d say, “Listen to Graham Nash.” Graham Nash of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, wrote the song *Teach Your Children Well.*\(^{31}\) It seems to me that should be our national anthem and replace the one we have.

My mother was a school teacher. She graduated from Colby College in 1939. She got her first job in Warren, Maine. She was paid $900 a year to teach high school. The smartest women I met growing up were high school teachers, and grade school teachers, too. There’s a reason for this, that we were able to raise our children as well as we did in the ’50s and ’60s. It was essentially by denying women access to other professions. I don’t mean that we overtly denied them; it was the culture. Smart women taught high school; and there were some fabulous teachers at Deering High School, too. I didn’t go to Deering, but my mother taught with the teachers there and regarded them as very close colleagues and friends.

Well, that world is gone now. Smart women are everywhere; and if you’re a good surgeon even in Maine, you can make somewhere between half a million and a million dollars a year. The highest paid school teacher you ever met, what is the amount that person is paid? $60,000, maybe $65,000? Things are whacky when it comes to taking care of our children. I have daughters who are teachers, and sons-in-laws, too; and teaching is as challenging and important in many ways as surgery.

**Meaningful Work**

I remember a day, May 20th, 2002, when I was going door-to-door in St. Albans, in a primary race for a House seat. (I’d been term-limited out in the Senate.) As I came down the road, I went up to a front porch where an elderly woman was sitting, maybe 75 years old. I asked her name.

“I’m Lucy Burke.” I asked, “How are you doing? I’m Peter Mills, running for the State Senate, blah, blah...... How are you?” She said, “Mr. Mills, if you’ve got a minute, I’ll tell you how I’m doing. Come up and sit down.”

I came up to the porch and sat down. Lucy said, “I worked most of my life in shoe shops and my husband worked on the roads. We bought this house, and two years later he died and left me alone here. I grew depressed and felt sorry for myself. I didn’t sleep well. I wasn’t eating right. I was not at all happy. And I heard about a program through the Kennebec Valley Community Action Program – KVCAP – where they would pay me $2.65 an hour to go into the schools and work with second graders who have trouble with reading.

“Six months ago I started doing this. I went into the local elementary school, and they gave me a second grader. I worked with him for several months and now he can read like a fiend! Now they have given me a new one. I’m not taking any anti-depressants. I sleep good. I’m eating well. And I’m very, very happy with my life. As you’re going around door-to-door, would you tell other old people about this program?” I said I would.

So, there are solutions available to us. If I had to summarize them, I would say, get out and run for the Legislature, it will be the thrill of your life if you get in, no matter how old you are. Learn to tell stories, because that will help you win. Pay our public bills as they come due. And teach our children well!

Thank you very much. (Applause)

**Q & A**

**Question:** I’m going to start off with the Republican Party.

**MILLS:** Well, that’s what I did!

**Question:** At the beginning of your career, the Maine Republican Party was traditionally moderate and centrist. Do you think that the Maine Party is now changing to align itself more nearly with the National Republican Party, with its strong Tea Party element?

**MILLS:** It is, but it will recognize that it can’t win in Maine without a different formula. It’s going to need people like Sen. Roger Katz of Augusta and former Sen. Richard Rosen of Bucksport, and a host of moderate business people who have helped to lead the Legislature over the years; and it will be difficult.

The Democrats went through similar problems, back in the ’70s; so, I think that there’s a future for the Republican Party. These basic predispositions – the conservative versus the liberal – are fundamental, the yin and yang of human personality. There will always be two parties, and no more than two. I can’t conceive of a third, I don’t know what the third party would do. Would it be a party that

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\(^{31}\)“Teach Your Children Well” is a song by Graham Nash. It first appeared on the album *Déjà Vu* by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, released in 1970. The recording features Jerry Garcia on pedal steel guitar. Released as a single, the song peaked at #16 on the Billboard Hot 100 charts that year. The song was featured in a 1971 British film, *Melody.*
says, “I’m for the great, muddling middle”? How would that translate into getting votes? I’ve talked with Angus King about this, and asked him, “Why don’t you start a party of your own, or something?” He said, “I don’t know. What would be the platform? How would it gain traction?”

I think the Republican Party is here to stay. It’s going through some evolution, and the Tea Party has to be given some rope. Speaker John Boehner saw this, and said, “I’m going to let this run, but I’m going to let it run just so far.” To his credit, he stopped putting the debt situation into play, and put the radical caucus and the public on notice that he would not allow the nation to default on its debt. It was terrible to shut down the federal government; but sometimes these things have to run a course, and we have to learn from the experience.

**Question:** Do you believe the tax rate on the middle class is more burdensome than it is for top income Americans? Would you favor a remedy? Are there two Americas? Does fixing it mean that you have to be a socialist to do it?

**MILLS:** I don’t use the word “socialist,” it sort of ends a conversation, rather than starts one. It would be very wise to broaden the base of the Maine sales tax and reduce the rate of the income tax. Why? Because the economists that I have talked to over the years have all said as much. I thought there was an opportunity to do it in the last legislative session, and someone should have seized the opportunity and tried it.

I don’t believe that taxation is the issue, however; it is the expenditure side. We are a country that can ill-afford to spend three trillion dollars a year on healthcare and end up with disappointing results. We’re not getting value out of that “system,” and I’m not sure that ObamaCare does enough to control costs.

I wish that Republicans had engaged in the Affordable Care Act lawmaking process, so that cost controls would have come more strongly to the fore. You have to have a united front to fend off (some of) the most powerful interests in America; and you need Republicans and Democrats acting together, to take them on.

**Question:** If you had been elected Governor in 2010, what might you have done and how would the state be different today?

**MILLS:** I would have taken the tax code apart in the way I just described. I would have gotten control of healthcare costs within the Medicaid and Medicare budgets. We have 39 very healthy, charity care hospitals in Maine, and they are wonderful institutions; but they now own not only the hospitals, they also own most of the medical practices that are affiliated with them. Therein lies the key to controlling costs.

We need accountable care organizations at the local and regional levels, so you can take the local hospital with its associated practices, and say: “All right, you have 2,000 Medicaid patients, they are now attached to you. The State will pay you several thousand dollars a year, whatever it takes, to manage their care; but you must reach out and manage the health of those individuals, from soup to nuts, because you’re going to get X dollars at the front of the program, and all of the risk will be yours to take. We’ll pay you reasonably to do it; but we want you to reach out where those people live, get the asthmatics into care, get the people with COPD into care, get the people with heart disease into care. Integrate mental health with physical health, and have a combined approach to managing the lives of these people, and begin to gain control over this behemoth that is strangling the American economy.” We can do it right here in Maine, we can start here. We’re nimble enough to do that.
**Question:** Are you going to run for governor again?

**MILLS:** I’ve got a lot of energy. Not this time; but I might.

**Question:** You mentioned Sen. Roger Katz and former Sen. Richard Rosen as the kind of legislators you admire. When you and I were young in Augusta, there were a score of prominent business leaders – mostly men and a few women – who set the tone for and led the Legislature. I think of names like Harry Richardson, Hody Hildreth, Joe Sewell, Ken McLeod, David and Sheri Huber, Hollis Wyman, Dick Berry, Chuck Cianchette, Minnette Cummings, and the list goes on. They were major private figures in the state before they went to the Legislature, and saw service there as the highlight of their careers and a civic responsibility: One doesn’t see that today. Where is the business community?

**MILLS:** I’m not quite sure, but I can tell you a little story about it. Very few people run for office on their own initiative. It typically happens when you get phone calls from people who identify you as a potential candidate. In 1994, when I was thinking about running, I began to get calls; it’s those calls that push you over the edge. I recall getting one from Sen. Micky Marden; if there was ever a businessman with acumen, it was Micky Marden. He had spent two years down there and couldn’t stand it because it was extremely time-consuming. He wanted out, and to be replaced by somebody he liked. Marden called me up and said in his wonderfully gruff voice, “Peter, you ought to run for this Senate seat. I can’t stand it down there. Maybe you’ll like it”.

Legislators coming into office are often appalled by the challenge and complexity of putting budgets and tax policy together.... We should get rid of all the stuff that’s getting in the way, and make it more appealing for business people and other busy people. 

“Legislators coming into office are often appalled by the challenge and complexity of putting budgets and tax policy together.... We should get rid of all the stuff that’s getting in the way, and make it more appealing for business people and other busy people. 

Legislators coming into office are often appalled by the challenge and complexity of putting budgets and tax policy together; and they retreat into safe matters like honoring the local basketball team that just won the state tournament, or the 50th anniversary of constituents Joe and Jessie. You wind up spending enormous amounts of time, with people making self-serving speeches about their constituents and ceremonies; instead of learning the intricacies of state government, plunging in, and beginning to create change. People are afraid of it, and it’s beyond me. It is tough work, so they just abandon it and retreat into frivolity. Serious business people have said, “I’m out of here, this is a waste of my time.”

I wrote a memorandum some years ago, “A Grumpy Critique of Maine’s State Legislature,” where I state all the things we might do to make life easier.32 I had a friend, a lawyer, who brought files down with him, went into the State Law Library, and sat there with the speaker on, so he could hear the proceedings and still do business. He tried to stay away from it all, and succeeded. Now, with laptops and cellphones, you actually can run a business while you’re in the Maine Legislature. There is greater opportunity now for a business person to be there and not lose attachment to his client and customers. That’s a good thing; but they’re still not ready to do it because it’s so bloody time-consuming.

My grandfather came up from Stonington on the train in 1902, 1904, and 1906, got into the Augusta House around about the 5th of January, and was gone home by March 28th. He would spend three months in Augusta each two years, and then go back to his law practice in Stonington. It was still this way in the 1950s and ’60s. You would meet two or three times a week over a span of just a few months, then go home; and you didn’t have to run hard, it wasn’t competitive. If people in the community knew you, they would vote for you. Now, you have to spend time going door-to-door and raising money, just to keep the job. As I said, my father didn’t campaign very seriously, he didn’t have to; and neither did Joe Sewall and most of the other people who ran a successful business.

**Question:** On another matter, what was your biggest challenge in taking on leadership of the Maine Turnpike Authority?

**MILLS:** I came to the organization with the idea that I would not be a “Chainsaw Al.” Candidly, I saw some of that in state government at the time. It’s a mistake to jump into an organization and fire the first fifteen people you find; that’s just not the way it should be done. We have 41 fewer people now at the MTA than when I came in. This was done largely by attrition, and in some cases by layoffs and changes within the organization. The first challenge is to understand the organization, so that you can begin to push it in the direction that you want to go; and that evolution is still going on, every day.

The recent toll increase has been the biggest single challenge. I went to nine public hearings scheduled all up and down the different communities. I gave out my cellphone number freely and people called me about it.

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We made it a policy to take on every single citizen complaint about the increase if we could and whether it came over Twitter or Facebook or Internet access. When there was something in the newspaper that wasn’t true, we answered it. We made it a point to be on top of it as much as we could.

**Question:** The scandal that preceded you at the Turnpike Authority was very unusual for Maine. It seemed to show a lack of effective oversight of the agency by the elected branches of state government. Was this a unique problem with the Authority, or are there other quasi-independent state agencies that need more accountability?

**MILLS:** It is unique in Maine, and there are now remedies in statute. I can tell you the cause: the culture of the organization went wrong. It was almost singularly the executive director, who was borrowing practices from Pennsylvania and New Jersey and New York and Florida and Texas and Colorado – and a lot of other places where turnpikes can be run like General Motors, where the expense account is treated as, “So long as it’s tax deductible, nobody particularly cares.”

A public institution cannot and must not be run that way; every single expenditure has to be justified. You can’t get to the end of a staff meeting at 4:30 in the afternoon and say, “Let’s all go out to Back Bay Grill and continue the discussion.” You just can’t do that in a public institution. There are some states in America where that is done, where it’s still going on. I’m very discouraged about the state of democracy in places like Pennsylvania and New Jersey and Illinois. I began by saying we’re darn lucky here in Maine; and we’re lucky because this happening at the Turnpike Authority was such an anomaly. It is not an anomaly elsewhere.

I was asked one time by Common Cause to come and talk about Clean Elections in front of the Pennsylvania Senate. I spent a day down there just introducing myself to Pennsylvania politics, and all that was going on. They were mostly all white men who had been in service for 20 or 30 years. Each member of the Legislature had a staff of two or three people. They had walnut offices in marble buildings. There was a practice that in the public budget a certain segment would be set aside for you, each member, to be spent ostensibly for something in your own district, earmarked for it. One member was being prosecuted for having spent it on his farm house. When I got the chance to speak I said, “Clean Elections? I’m sorry, you don’t want more public money spent on your elections; you’ve already got it. I don’t think Clean Elections is your remedy.”

**Question:** Both George Mitchell and Angus King have cited congressional redistricting as one of the big problems they see with the system today, because it creates unbalanced districts and encourages extreme voting patterns. Both advise that it must be taken out of partisan political hands. Do you see any hope for this, since it is everywhere a state matter and responsibility? :

**MILLS:** You know, it is not broken here in Maine; it works, as I said earlier. If the Legislature doesn’t get a two-thirds vote for its proposed redistricting plan, then it goes to Maine’s Supreme Court to decide. So, the parties are forced to work with each other, and they do, it works. However, the solution does have to come state-by-state. This is part of the price we pay for federalism, and I’m not terribly optimistic. I don’t have an answer for that.

“Whatever (the Maine political culture) is, we need to sell it to others. The nation can use what we have; the nation should imitate Maine in government.”

**Question:** During Libby Mitchell’s visit, we talked at some length about the problem of economic disparities among Maine’s counties, especially in the northern and interior counties compared to the southern and coastal counties. Would you comment on the direction you believe state economic development should take in the coming years?

**MILLS:** It has always annoyed me that people who get elected to the Legislature go down there with some idea that they can pass a law that is going to make all of Maine prosperous. It just ain’t going to happen! I think there is a role for the Department of Economic and Community Development. The most effective thing it can do is to reach out to likely business prospects and bring them in. I think almost anything the Legislature does is likely to be counter-productive, not likely to be successful, and may well be counterproductive.

The most productive thing they could do would be to get the state’s own house in order, gain control over the Medicaid account and healthcare and unfunded pension liabilities, and develop a rational tax code. Remember when the Snow & Nealey Company closed in Bangor? They had been in business making axes and hatchets and knives for a hundred and some odd years. When they closed the doors, Mr. Nealey said, “The only thing my family and I ever did wrong was, we paid our taxes every year, and we never got any special benefits.”

We can stop doing special favors just to attract one business over another. Just be fair. And do something about education, because the people who want to come here have children, and the first thing they ask is, “How are the schools? What’s the grade school like? What’s the high school like?” That is the state’s function.
**Question:** This sort of connects to your comments about Pennsylvania. You say that Maine is special in its democratic functioning. How and why is it different from, say, Massachusetts or other states? What accounts for our particular political culture?

**MILLS:** I don’t know, I’m just very grateful for it. Whatever it is, we need to sell it to others. The nation can use what we have, and the nation should imitate Maine in state government.

There are just a whole host of things: the rules by which we move bills through the Legislature, the House and the Senate; the fact that the committee chairs are not allowed to kill legislation; every member has the right to offer an amendment if he or she wishes. The way the Legislature functions is very, very open, and self-regulating. Every member takes it on his own not to put in more bills than he should, or more amendments than necessary or appropriate, not to gum up the works. It’s very, very gently administered. And it works.

We should get rid of all the pompous ceremonies and all the stuff that’s getting in the way, and make it more appealing for business people and other busy people. Any busy person would think twice about going down there. For whatever reason, they are busy – you may be raising children or what have you – but it’s hard to commit that time. We need to make it easier to get qualified people to participate in this wonderful process called the Maine Legislature.

**Question:** President Kennedy once remarked that values lie at the very heart of government, not ideology, not principles, not interests, but values – the things we hold most dear and we cherish and are willing to defend with our lives, if needed. What core values did you try to apply, legislating on Maine people’s behalf?

**MILLS:** I think the core value that this democracy is founded upon is equality of opportunity; not equality of outcome, but equality of opportunity. I’m trying to make sure that every kid gets a fair start in life; that the remedies for dealing with the poor are fair and appropriate; that the mentally ill are well taken care of, even if we’ve closed down the institutions that we once used to house them. That’s the precept that I used, to keep in uppermost in my mind.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I think that Peter should run for Governor. And if Peter doesn’t run for Governor, I’m going to run! I just want you all to know. I’m not joking, I’m not kidding you here. I’m very, very serious. I’ve been in politics. I’ve been a county commissioner. I’ve been a counselor. I’ve been a teacher. I want Peter to be the next governor because the three people running are lousy. They are not the people that we should vote for, and there isn’t one of the three that I can vote for.

**MILLS:** And I’ll be your Chief of Staff if you get elected!

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** No, I’ll be yours! (Raucous applause)