

Women in Leadership: Pathways and Possibilities

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What a great way this is to celebrate the women leaders of yesterday and today, and to encourage the leaders of tomorrow during Women's History Month! I am delighted to be here in this marvelous replica of the room where we work and where Senator Kennedy served so well.

It certainly was fascinating to hear my friend, mentor, and colleague Senator Mikulski reflect on her work and friendship with Senator Kennedy. To hear the Dean of Senate Women talk about the Lion of the Senate is like having a front-row seat to history.

Of course, any reflections about Senator Kennedy has to include his famous reply to the Green Bay Packers when they offered him a contract after his standout season playing tight end for the Harvard Crimson: "No thanks. I have plans to go into another contact sport – politics."

I had the honor of serving with Senator Kennedy for 12 years. We worked together on many education issues, particularly by increasing Pell grants which help our neediest students. In our work together on the Armed Services Committee, we joined forces to strengthen our Navy as members of the Seapower Subcommittee.

Ted was a partner who always sought solutions. With Ted, the debate was never personal. He would debate vigorously and loudly on the Senate floor and then come over to clap you on the back, laugh, and say, "How did I do?" But what I liked most about Ted was his love of his family and his interest in ours. I shall never forget being invited into his hide-away office in the Capitol where he proudly showed me framed pictures of his family and other treasured mementos.

One time we talked about our mothers. The very next day he appeared with a copy of an out-of-print book written by his mother that he wanted my mother to have. "Tell me her whole name so that I can sign it for her," he said. "It's Patricia Roselene McGuigan Collins," I replied. Well, you can just imagine how much he loved my mother's Irish heritage. He just roared with laughter and signed the book.

While it is tempting to continue with many more of my treasured memories of Ted, I am looking forward to today's discussion and to hear my colleagues talk about their journeys to leadership. Let me tell you a bit about mine.

I was blessed with great role models for public service. Both my mother and father served as mayor of my hometown of Caribou, Maine. My father served in the State Senate, and my mother chaired the University of Maine System Board of trustees. They taught me that you had no right to complain if you weren't willing to get involved.

In Washington, the legendary trailblazer Margaret Chase Smith was Senator the entire time I was growing up. Although I didn't realize it at the time, a meeting I had with her as a high

school senior in Washington was the first step in my journey to the United States Senate. And today, I sit at Senator Smith's desk on the Senate floor.

My journey to the Senate was not an easy one. In 1994, I decided to run for Governor of Maine even though my last elected office had been student council president in high school. Although any political pundit would note I didn't have the money or name ID to run for public office, I felt I could make a difference, and the race for Governor that year was my opportunity.

I won a grueling eight-way primary to become the first woman nominated by a major party to be governor of Maine. Then came the general election – I lost.

Actually, I got clobbered, finishing third in a four-way race. I am forever grateful to the Green Party candidate who prevented me from finishing dead last. By the way, the winner of that race was Angus King, with whom I now serve in the Senate, proof that your opponent one day can be your ally the next.

After the 1994 campaign, I was exhausted, broke, uninsured, and unemployed. But I learned much from the experience, met wonderful people from all over the State, and had conducted my campaign with integrity.

I learned many lessons during that campaign. One that surprised me at the time was that women candidates often do face barriers that their male counterparts do not. One incident at a campaign event summed it up. A young banker told me he agreed with me on all the issues. Then he told me he just couldn't vote for me because he couldn't imagine a woman running the State of Maine. I was shocked that he would think that, much less actually say it.

After I lost, I was fortunate to get a job immediately at Husson University in Bangor. I once again had a pay check, health insurance, and stability.

Then after I had been at Husson for about 14 months, the unexpected happened. In 1996, Senator Bill Cohen announced he would not seek re-election. My phone began ringing off the hook from supporters urging me to run. I'll never forget the older woman from Lewiston who told me she hadn't voted for me in '94 but wanted another chance because I'd been such a "gracious loser."

Part of me said I couldn't do it, I couldn't afford it, I couldn't take the risk of losing again. The other part said I didn't want at age 85 to be sitting in my rocking chair by the fire, muttering "If only..." Happily, that part of me won the argument, and on election night of 1996, the voters handed me a narrow victory. Since then, I have been elected three more times with ever-increasing margins, winning 68.4% of the vote in 2014.

Since that first win, I have attempted to recruit other women to run for public office. Time and again, I see smart, capable women talk themselves out of running for office. Lynn Martin, a former Labor Secretary, described this self-doubt this way: A woman thinks she needs a PhD in economics in order to discuss trade policy. A man who sells Hondas considers himself an expert. We women need to have more confidence in ourselves.

The women in the Senate today span the ideological spectrum and have different views on the issues of the day just as the men do. Although it is dangerous to generalize, I believe our experiences tend to produce a more collaborative, pragmatic, problem-solving approach. That was demonstrated when the women of the Senate led the way in ending the devastating government shutdown of 2013.

We share a special bond forged by similar experiences as women in public life. Thanks to Senator Mikulski, the women of the Senate get together regularly for dinner. After one of our dinners, a male Senator asked me what we had talked about. My answer was, "We were planning the coup."

The fact is, achieving leadership positions does not require a coup, but rather a commitment. Thank you all for coming together to affirm our commitment to encourage and support the next generation of women leaders.