

Casting and Recasting

Senator Edward M. Kennedy Dinner Speech
17 Quincy Street, October 20, 1992

THIS IS INTENDED as a chance for all of us to express our special appreciation to Senator Kennedy and to Congressman William Ford, as well as to their staffs, for what they have accomplished this year on behalf of higher education – specifically in leading the long effort to design and finally pass the Higher Education Reauthorization Act.

Many of us know that this major piece of legislation was signed in July. But few of us appreciate how much was involved in casting and recasting, debating and re-debating, and finally coaxing Congress into a sufficient state of convergence so that this fiendishly complicated bill could become law. Having watched parts of the drama from a distance and having read the relevant pages in the *Congressional Record*, I can unequivocally say how much higher education (especially students and their families) will benefit from the eighteen months of analysis, negotiation, and persistent hard work that were necessary to bring about this formidable achievement.

I want to take a moment to outline some of the main provisions of the new Act.

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First, it authorizes increases in the stipend for Pell Grants, allowing them to rise incrementally every year, from \$3,700 in 1993 to \$4,500 by 1997. It also increases the authorization for College Work-Study Programs.

Second, the new Act raises the allowable loan limits for college students, simplifies the needs-analysis process, and removes family home-equity as an item that is taken into account in federal needs analysis.

Next, it takes a major step by creating a “direct lending” demonstration project. This will allow many students and families to borrow funds directly from universities under the federal Guaranteed Student Loan Program, rather than requiring them first to seek their loans from banks. The new process will not only be far simpler but also less expensive for everyone.

Finally (and this is important, and it took literally months of discussion), new provisions were passed to allow colleges and universities to enter into purely voluntary agreements to award students financial aid on the basis of need. The institutions are also permitted to discuss broad principles that serve as a means of determining eligibility for student aid. There can be no discussion or comparison of offers to individual students, but the newly passed legislation goes a considerable distance toward correcting some of the potentially damaging effects of the situation created by the recent antitrust rulings of the Justice Department.

These are only a few of the important provisions of the new bill, and none of them, during a recession and during the difficulties of an election year, was even remotely easy to manage. The effort was bipartisan, with strong help from both sides of the aisle. But it would never have happened at all had it not been for several critical people.

In one sense, we know a great deal about how much Senator Kennedy does – and *has* done for so many years. In addition to his work on higher education, he has oversight (as chairman of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources) of all biomedical research and training legislation in the Senate. He has been enor-

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mously influential in helping to set directions for the National Institutes of Health and has had a great effect on other health-related legislation, including childhood nutrition and the pursuit of national health insurance programs. Although he is not a member of the Senate Committee on Finance, his stature is such that he has consistently made a difference in setting priorities for tax legislation and funding.

Yet all of this – plus his work in the field of immigration legislation, his steady support for the full participation and advancement of women and minorities in our society, and his more direct work on behalf of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts – all of this gives us only an inkling of the major role he plays in our national public life. That is because a tally of his specific accomplishments and official positions doesn't really convey what seem to me to be his most important contributions.

Senator Kennedy, true to the tradition of his family, has always approached his work as if there were more to do than could be accomplished, and far too little time to do what might be attempted. Managing legislation on the Senate floor or in conference is not an activity that lends itself to portrayal in terms of the bold, broad strokes and utterances associated with heroic political leadership. As we know, it is a process that is saturated with details, that depends on the cooperation and agreement of many people, that requires months and months of patience and perseverance, and that often results in legislation so complex that the public may not recognize its significance.

Under such conditions, many members of Congress – even excellent members – are pleased if they are able to pass any legislation at all. What is rare about Senator Kennedy is his extraordinary intuition, guided by deep conviction: an intuition that enables him to sense where the critical issues and the large opportunities really lie, waiting to be realized and turned into action. He is practical, he gets things done, but he doesn't see politics as merely the art of the possible. Instead, he presses more forcefully to see what might *conceivably* be possible if our angle of vision were

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shifted, if some of the apparently fixed points were moved. Walter Bagehot once remarked that “the great pleasure in life is doing what people say you cannot do.” Approaching life from this vantage point does change our sense of its probabilities, and that is exactly what Senator Kennedy does as a matter of course.

If you had asked me a year ago what the odds were of passing the Higher Education Reauthorization Act with all the major provisions I described earlier – especially those related to need-based aid – I doubt I would have given the idea more than a 25 percent chance. It simply didn’t seem to me as if it could be done. But the Senator saw that it just perhaps *might* be done – and it was.

There is one last point that I would like to make. So much of what Ted Kennedy achieves is the result of a commitment not to a set of abstract ideals or goals but to actual people and their welfare, to individuals and their daily lives, to the ways in which things can be made better for everyone. On a purely personal note, I remember that one of the first telephone calls I received after being appointed last year came from Ted. He was calling from his car, having just left a meeting. It was 11:30 at night. He simply wanted to congratulate me, to say hello, and to say how much he looked forward to meeting Angelica and me. We were still feeling slightly like displaced persons, and the call gave us very much the sense that there was someone at the other end of the telephone line who had not only sent a genuinely friendly greeting, but who was ready to help out if needed.

I am certain that Ted has touched countless other people in the same way. In this respect, he shares some of the qualities that were once described by Isaiah Berlin in an essay about an American political leader from an earlier era:

*[He evoked] an obscure feeling on the part of the majority of the citizens . . . that he was on their side, that he wished them well, and that he would do something for them. . . . He showed that it was possible to be politically effective and yet . . . human.*¹

1 Isaiah Berlin, *Personal Impressions* (New York: Viking, 1981), 28, 31.