



TRIBUTE

SPEAKER TIP O'NEILL—A GIANT OF THE HOUSE

*Senator Edward M. Kennedy**

The death of Speaker Tip O'Neill deprived the nation of one of its most beloved leaders of the past half century. Tip was a giant in every way—a giant of a man, a giant of a Speaker, a giant of a friend. He never lost the common touch, and all those whose lives he touched have lost a wonderful friend.

Many of us in Massachusetts think Tip finally got tired of waiting for the Red Sox to win the World Series.¹

He liked to call his friends “old pal” or “beautiful.” But in truth he was the best old pal and the most beautiful one of all. He leaves us with extraordinary memories, including the laughter from his endless supply of stories, and the sheer joy he had telling them.

One of his most famous tales was the story he said he told at a hundred bankers' conventions, and they loved it every time. A homebuyer was applying for a loan, and the banker said, “You can have it on one condition. I have a glass eye and a real eye, and if you can tell them apart, you've got the loan.” The applicant studied each of the banker's eyes, and finally said, “The glass eye is the left eye.” “Correct,” said the banker, “But how could you tell?” “It was easy,” said the applicant. “The left eye has the warmth in it.”

There was never any secret about the genius of Tip O'Neill. In his years from 1977 through 1986 as Speaker of the U.S. House of

* United States Senate (D-MA). B.A., Harvard College (1956); International Law School, The Hague, The Netherlands (1958); LL.B, University of Virginia (1959). Senator Kennedy was elected to the Senate on November 6, 1962, to complete the term of President John F. Kennedy. He has since been re-elected to five successive Senate terms. Senator Kennedy serves on numerous committees, including serving as Chairman of the Labor and Human Resources Committee, as well as the Chairman for both the Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Affairs and the Subcommittee on Regional Defense and Contingency Forces.

¹ The Boston Red Sox last won the World Series in 1918. *THE WORLD ALMANAC AND BOOK OF FACTS 1994*, at 953 (Robert Famighetti et al. eds., 1994).

Representatives, the entire nation came to know and love him as we did in Massachusetts. He was a Speaker who was never afraid to speak out for the average man and woman—workers trying to keep a job, children going hungry in the night, families hoping to make ends meet, senior citizens struggling to live in dignity in retirement. Such people are the backbone of America. They are found by the millions in communities across the country, and all of them are better off today because of Tip O'Neill.

When his political and ideological opponents tried to paint him as a symbol of the past, they succeeded only in turning him into an even greater national hero than before. He was the glue that held the Democratic Party together in the Reagan years, and no one could have done it better.

He was Irish to the core, with the map of Ireland on his face, and the warmest Irish heart and personality I have ever met—overflowing with compassion and concern for all those who needed his help the most.

In the days after his death, when looking through some of his speeches, I came across some remarks he made in 1981 that captured his philosophy of public life:

For over 50 years, with brief exceptions, the Democratic Party has been the first choice of the American people to be the principal governing party of this Nation. When in the past we have lost, it was not because our supporters joined the opposition, it was because our supporters believed we had lost touch with their concerns and were not governing well.

The reason that we were the first choice of the American people in national elections for the past 50 years was that F.D.R. made the Federal Government responsible for guaranteeing a decent standard of living for every American. . . . “[A] living which gives a man not only enough to live by, but something to live for.”²

Those words were his enduring ideal—the essence of Tip O'Neill. He never mortgaged his beliefs to the passing fashions of the time. He walked with presidents and kings, but his favorite stroll was always down the street in Cambridge to Barry's Corner. He became one of the most powerful men in the world—but he never forgot the worker in Somerville, the senior citizen in East Boston, the barber in

² 127 CONG. REC. 4443 (1981).

North Cambridge, the young family starting out whose grandparents he knew. His Irish smile could light up a living room, as well as the whole Congress.

He lost his first race for public office, for the Cambridge City Council, by 160 votes, because, he said, he had taken his own neighborhood for granted. His father took him aside after the defeat and told him, "All politics is local. Don't forget it." And he never did; in fact, that phrase, "all politics is local," became synonymous with Tip O'Neill in the finest sense of those words, and was the hallmark of his extraordinary career in public life for the next half century.

He was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1936, at the age of 23. He rose to become Minority Leader in 1947 and Speaker in 1949. The congressional district he served had also been President Kennedy's district, when my brother John was in the House, and before that my grandfather Honey Fitz's.³ President Kennedy thought the world of Tip, and when my brother moved from the U.S. House of Representatives to the Senate in 1952, he was proud that it was Tip O'Neill who took his place.

The Speaker lives on in the hearts of thousands of his friends, and the tens of millions more who never met him, but whose lives are better today and whose hopes are brighter because he was a Speaker who spoke so powerfully for them.

In an era of so much pretension and superficiality and poll-driven decisions in public life, Tip O'Neill was the real thing, and the nation was fortunate to have his service and his leadership for so long. We will all miss him dearly.

³ Tip O'Neill represented Massachusetts' 8th Congressional District from 1953-1986. John Kennedy served as the district's Representative from 1947-1953. Honey Fitz (John Francis) Kennedy served from 1895-1901. Today, the district is represented by Joseph P. Kennedy II, eldest son of my brother Robert.