

O'Neill of the House: A Majority Leader's Perspective

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"I think the day has passed of a Sam Rayburn glaring down the House. We'll never go back to that era."

That is the view of Thomas P. O'Neill, the new majority leader of the House, who first came to Congress in the era of "Mr. Sam," the iron-willed Texan who knew the House intimately, bent it to his will and, more often than not, carried it on his back.

"To be perfectly truthful, I think that was the best system," Mr. O'Neill said this week as he moved into his new job.

For Thomas Phillip O'Neill, now 60 years old, was pretty iron-willed himself during his years, before coming to Congress, as Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives (1948-52).

But "Tip" O'Neill, the son of an Irish bricklayer from County Cork, is as realistic as he is sentimental. He is aware that his unanimous election as majority leader cast him into the role of bridge builder between those now aging lawmakers who grey up in the era of political power barons and those younger more impatient newcomers who are intent on sweeping away all vestiges of "the Establishment."

The Job Ahead

Slouching comfortably in an oversized chair in his tastefully decorated Capitol office, occasionally brushing back an unruly mop of white hair from his brow, Mr. O'Neill spoke quietly of what he sees as the job ahead.

There will be House reforms, of that he is certain. He is obviously unhappy about some of the changes to come, but knows that "the time has come" and is not working actively against the changes but, instead, is "trying to help things along."

All reform, he mused, "goes with the swing of the times," recalling the successful House revolt in 1910 against the autocratic speaker, "Uncle Joe" Cannon of Illinois.

Speaker Cannon was stripped of most of his vast powers, Mr. O'Neill recalled, and "King Caucus took over for a few years. But then there was a lot of wheeling and dealing in caucus, and

King Caucus was wiped out and seniority took its place."

Now, young House Democratic liberals appear on the verge of at least modifying the seniority system in selection of committee chairmen by reinstating what Mr. O'Neill calls "King Caucus,"—that is, giving the Democratic caucus the right to vote separately on each committee chairman, instead of the usual practice of endorsing committee assignments as a bloc.

"I'm in total agreement with the Speaker [Carl Albert of Oklahoma] that committee chairmen should be elected in the most democratic way possible," Mr. O'Neill said. "The time has come for this, and I'd be surprised if there is any serious opposition on the floor."

But Mr. O'Neill is less enchanted with another proposal to place a 70-year age limit on committee chairmen.

Opposed to Age Limit

"It looks to me as if it may pass, this 70-year stuff," he said, "but I've never been one for the age limit."

Neither is he enthusiastic about proposals to ban all closed meetings of committees. Often, he said, "the most stupid questions have served to throw the most light on a given subject," and some members might be reluctant to ask such questions in open session, fearing they might be sneered at by the audience.

But, sensing the mood of the reformers, Mr. O'Neill said he would be willing to go along with a proposal that all committee meetings be open unless a majority votes to close a given session.

He is concerned, too, over reform proposals to abolish the closed rule—that is, a rule precluding offering of amendments to a bill on the floor.

He recalled the endless days of debate over the Smoot-Hawley tariff bill in the late nineteen-twenties—a debate so acrimonious and free-wheeling that the House subsequently made provision for the closed rule.

"The country's becoming protectionist again," he said. "You get a tariff bill on the floor today with an open rule, and there will be 4,000 amendments to it. There are going to be people who want

to protect the shoe industry, protect the glass industry, protect the fish industry. . ."

Yet, again sensing the strong move toward reform, Mr. O'Neill suggested that the caucus might consider some sort of compromise, perhaps allowing a certain percentage of a committee handling a given piece of legislation to determine to what extent floor amendments might be offered.

For a Strong Committee

But while dubious about some of the proposed reforms—and critical of some of the citizens' lobbies that have sprung up in recent years to spur reform—Mr. O'Neill enthusiastically endorsed the idea of creating a strong Democratic Policy Committee to work closely with the leadership.

Noting that the existing policy committee is virtually dormant, he said that he, for one, wanted an active one to come up with new ideas and new approaches.

He also said he planned to work closely with Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana, the Senate majority leader. In recent years, there has been little dialogue between the Democratic leadership of the two houses.

"I'm very friendly with Mike Mansfield," he said. "We're going to work together. Our staffs are going to work together. We speak each other's language."

Mr. O'Neill also said he would maintain "an open door" policy for all members, particularly younger members who, in recent years, have complained over being shut out of decision-making by "the establishment."

In recent weeks Mr. O'Neill's attention has been directed at the mechanics of building a strong party apparatus, not at formulating an agenda of legislative issue.

While unwilling to discuss in detail what he views as the major legislative goals for this Congress, he said he had two broad priorities: ending the war and re-

establishing the powers of Congress.

"My highest priority is to stop this war," he said. Representing a district embracing Harvard and a number of other academic communities, he was one of the first Democrats to break with President Johnson, his old friend, on the war issue.

Does he favor cutting off funds for the war?

"What good would it do?" he replied. "I've been told there's enough money in the pipeline to keep this war going a lot longer than I want to see it last."

But he said Congress was not without weapons to coerce the President into ending the war. He suggested that Congress "might see fit to cut some of the President's staff, maybe, or maybe close down some of his own pet programs."

Mr. O'Neill's second priority, he said, is to re-establish Congress as a co-equal branch of Government, no longer subservient to the Presidency.

"The powers of Congress have eroded, we all know that," he said, "and the people realize it now more than ever. We're going to do something about that."

Does he feel equal to the job?

"Well," he replied, "I've been in public life a long time, and I've had some pretty responsible jobs, and I haven't been a failure at any of them yet."

He paused for just a moment, chuckled softly, and added, "And I don't intend to be a failure at this one, either."