

Politics: Is It An Honorable Profession?

Editor's Note: The following depth story was written for an advanced reporting class at the School of Journalism following an appearance at the University by Governor Morrison, at which approximately 60 persons were present.

By Wallis Lundeen

An angry governor and a high school history teacher both demand that young people be taught about the structure of the American political system. The changing role of government is pointed out by a professional politician, and politicians become increasingly aware that people have the idea that parties are bad.

These comments seem to indicate that politicians and educators are placing increased emphasis on the need for more political education. Politicians are also actively encouraging young people to

train for and consider a career in politics.

The late President John F. Kennedy, who, in the words of President Lyndon B. Johnson, "had a very special meaning to the young," regarded politics as one of the highest forms of human endeavor. President Johnson told a delegation from a university that Kennedy's most important contribution, his real legacy to the country, was "his persuasive argument to the young people of our country to enter the field of politics and government."

What is politics? Politics has many faces and many definitions for different people. It is an honorable profession to a governor; a profession requiring brains and talent to a secretary of state; it is the machinery of government, the art of accomplishment, and possibly a future career.

What is a politician? The dictionary defines him as one versed in the science of government, or one addicted to, or actively engaged in, politics as managed by parties.

During the last campaign, Governor Frank B. Morrison became concerned with the general image of politics in the state. Too many young people, especially, he found, felt leery of the politician. Young people viewed the politician "as an unscrupulous individual seeking only self-gain and position," he said.

Morrison describes politics and its importance today this way. "Politics is an honorable profession, and, most certainly, one of the most critical of our day. For, on the politician's shoulders, hangs the fate of our democracy."

Concerned with this image, and desiring to encourage interest in politics as a possible profession, and to begin a program of education to help change the image of politics, Governor Morrison scheduled two discussion groups with midwestern governors. The first was held at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln on May 10, with Governor William Avery of Kansas. The second was held on May 12 at Wayne State College with South Dakota Governor Nils A. Bok.

"I should note that both of these gentlemen are Republicans," Morrison said. "I believe it important that we attack this problem on a bipartisan approach, thus discouraging the perennial critics."

Facing a nearly empty auditorium at the University, Morrison declared that "the very fact that this room isn't filled with students is a reflection on the fact that we need a revitalization in our political system."

Although Morrison said the attendance was a sign of "dangerous apathy" toward politics and government, and was a reflection on both the University and the state of Nebraska, he later said that he was partly to blame.

Returning to the theme of the discussion, Avery said it must be emphasized that the profession of politics is "a very honorable one."

Assuming that politics is bad is a popular misconception, Lowell H. Hummel, state chairman of the Nebraska Young Republicans, said. "My activities in politics have proven that it is not corrupt. As a human activity there is bound to be sin, however."

John Reiser, president of the University of Nebraska Young Republicans, feels that politics is losing some of the stigma "which has been attached to it since time began."

This same view was expressed by Clair A. Callan, U.S. Representative from Nebraska, who said that politics as a profession now has a better public image than it has ever had before.

But the basic problem underlying young people's reluctance to consider politics as a profession, even with encouragement from teachers and politicians, was expressed by Jasper Shannon, political science professor at the University of Nebraska. "The question is, 'How do you eat until you become a statesman?'" he said.

However, Hummel said that limited means does not exclude political activity, but "it certainly adds difficulty. I'm speaking specifically about a person interested in public office because this requires exposure to many voters. In order to accomplish this, one must be away from a job, an indirect cost, and also spend money traveling over the state, a direct cost."

Shannon also listed several possible solutions for solving this basic problem. Some pro-

grams are already in effect, such as the National Civic Foundation internship programs, which allow young people to work in government offices for a period of time.

In the current situation, Shannon also suggested that young people could train to be political science teachers, and then obtain political science training scholarships for further study. This would open the door to a political career, he feels.

The Federal Government has also taken steps to bring young people into active participation into the government. The White House Fellows Program, formerly financed by the Carnegie Corporation, was announced by President Johnson in 1964.

A search was conducted to find fifteen individuals between the ages of 23 and 35, who would participate in the Federal Government at the highest level for a period of one year, after which they would be expected to return to private life. They serve for a year either in the White House or in one of the ten Executive Departments working directly with the respective Cabinet officers.

No results of the effectiveness of this program are available, and it will not solve the "money problem," but it makes contacts with high government officials.

In his book, "Money in Politics," Shannon suggests the possibility of subsidizing public information programs on radio and television. Although subsidization would not receive general support, he believes that forums, joint debates and discussions would give young aspiring politicians the opportunity to make themselves and their views known without a great deal of expense.

Shannon also stated that it "is very essential to have more education of a different sort. What is taught in schools today is too often a glorification of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and an idealization of the democratic process."

What must be taught is an understanding of the workings of the government and political parties in everyday life, he said. "If people understood why money is needed in politics, they would not be so apt to say, 'Me give money to crooks?' when asked to actively support a party."

At first public knowledge of how their money is used in politics might not change the operations of political parties, but as more people become involved, they will demand an open accounting of party functions, Shannon pointed out.

"The poor public image of politics and the problem of encouraging young people to enter politics will never be cleared up until we can solve the problem of where candidates get their money," he said.

These two forces—information about the realities of politics, and public forums so young people can present their views will be influential in changing the political scene, Shannon believes.

A novel and experimental approach to teaching history in order to bring this information about political realities to young students is being taken by a Lincoln history teacher. He is Tom Douglas, history teacher at Lincoln Southeast High School.

"We start at the back of the book, and work toward the front. Too often in history classes, students are never taught about anything more current than World War I because the semester comes to an end. This year I have concentrated on political structure. We emphasized the presidential election last fall, and its relationship to

the rest of the political structure," Douglas said.

Douglas attempts to teach his students to understand the nature of the American political system, and to challenge their political ideas and beliefs. "I try to get them not to accept things at their face value," he said.

"I think we underestimate young people's ability to handle information about the political system. Everyone, including high school students, is more politically astute than we were a few years ago."

Although Douglas is firmly convinced of the value of his methods, and actively works to encourage other teachers to accept them, he says he becomes discouraged because he finds teachers cynical about politics. "The cynical attitude of American youth reflects the attitude of cynical teachers," he said.

Douglas attributes interest in political groups and causes to more knowledge about politics, but he emphasizes that more education is needed to establish a clear view of the political process.

Someone once asked former Senate Chaplain Edward Everett Hale if he prayed for the Senators. "No," Hale replied. "I look at the Senators and pray for the country."

Secretary of State Frank Marsh points out that government has changed. The idea of government used to be that it was the last resting place for people who couldn't make it in any other profession. But today, government is "a highly competitive entity of economic business. Government must compete with private industry for the best in brains, talent and administrative ability. The public hasn't kept up with this change," he said.

Can and should young people be educated and trained to be professional politicians? Governor Morrison replies that "there can be no question that politics and government have been victimized by an unfortunate few. It is our responsibility to first root out these unworthy people and then extol the virtues of this area professionally. It is a most worthy profession that directly needs the talents and enthusiasm of our young."

An old saying goes, "Politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is thought necessary." Politics is characterized by shrewdness and sagaciousness, according to Marsh. "It takes a shrewd person to represent the people, and tactful sagaciousness to serve the needs of the people. Yes, we can educate young people to be politicians in the sense that we need capable administrators of established governmental policy. We do need to produce more individuals like this," he continued.

Representative Callan said, "I would most certainly encourage young people to train for politics as a profession. It has become increasingly clear that politics involves the whole range of the usual school subject matter from science of the most involved types to broad social science subjects. Therefore, the traditional liberal arts background plus education in the hows and whys of politics itself would be the best background one could obtain."

Opinions differ as to when political education should begin in schools. More about politics as a profession could be taught in high schools, but not in elementary schools, Reiser said. "Let me say that politics is not learned from a book. The only way to learn politics is to become involved in it and to be willing to perform a multitude of rather uninteresting tasks before big opportunities present themselves."

However, Callan believes

that teaching of politics and government should begin at the earliest possible age, although elementary school youngsters would not be ready for analysis of political science.

Philip Sorensen, lieutenant governor, believes that politics in the sense of the art of government should be taught at all ages of formal training. He considers politics the method by which leadership in government is chosen policy established, and by which government governs. "Certain phases of this machinery or method should be taught at every grade level."

However, Sorensen noted that most people think of politics as limited to the method of choosing governmental leadership. Since this is true, he said, "I think politics should be included in the curriculum as early as social studies are included."

Grade school is the place to begin teaching the responsibilities required of a citizen in a democracy, Hummel emphasized. "Participation on the foundation of intelligence by individuals is the only hope for a lasting democracy. Curricula should contain basic government structural information as well as philosophical foundations," he said.

Marsh is not sure that young people can be educated about the duties of public officials. He said young people must seek out answers if they wish to know more about politics. "Too many people just accept things—we must develop a fact-finding attitude in our young people, and this can be done in school," he said.

What effects would education of young people have on the profession of politics? Hummel answers that education in politics will certainly contribute to the building of better standards in politics.

To raise the opinion of politics in the minds of young people and the general public, the simple answer would be to love thy neighbor as thyself, he said. "If this were done, the negative persuasion would be non-existent. Political parties can erase the bad image by fielding the finest of men and women for public office."

Reiser said that since political professionals provide the leadership for the nation, he believes people's opinions of politics will "vary in direct relationship to their opinion of their leadership. As to their opinion of politics completely divorced from personalities, I don't think much can be done about that."

Callan agreed that often people's interest in politics is in "direct proportion to their interest in a specific public policy question. This is not as true as it used to be since many questions now are of concern to a wide range of the population. I think education has had quite a bit to do with this trend and would encourage such education," he said.

He also noted that politics is the process through which the public does the things it wants done, and "the more understanding of this process, on a wide scale, the more likely we are to do what the people want done. Education is certainly at the forefront in getting more people to understand the process."

Hummel would agree with William E. Gladstone, who wrote in 1889, "I always admired the saying that politics and theology were the only two really great subjects." Hummel restated it this way—"When you stop to think about forces in our lives, government is second only to one's religion."

Would education about politics raise the standards of professionalism in politics? Working politicians, and young people just entering the

political world, both came to the defense of politics in reply.

Both parties run candidates that are dedicated to serving the public, Hummel said. He called for total participation in public affairs to raise the good quality of public officials to "greater heights." "Young people must be convinced of the effect of legislation on their future lives, even though they are not franchised to vote." The type of education is not all important for a young person who wishes to enter the field of politics, but rather the "desire to learn and apply ones talents is the important stimulation," he said.

Young people should participate in politics to further their own philosophy of government and politics, and not merely for the idea of lifting standards "which are no lower than those of any other business one might chose to enter."

Sorensen did feel that teaching about the function and operation of politics would encourage interest in voting, and more active participation of the general public in public affairs.

However, an opposing viewpoint was expressed by Reiser, a young worker in party affairs, who thinks an extensive program of political education in the school systems would have "little or no" effect on voting and interest in government affairs.

"People would continue to motivate themselves by their reaction to the status quo," he said. "If things seem to be going well, vote for the 'ins;' if not, vote for the 'outs.'"

What leads to an interest in politics among young people when they are not encouraged in school?

Reiser became involved in politics when he was seven years old, through his grandmother, who was Clerk of Court in Lake County, South Dakota. He joined the University Young Republican's almost immediately after arriving on campus for his freshman year.

He intends to remain active in Republican affairs as long as he feels he can be useful, and adds that, should the party decide he could be of help on a full-time basis, he would become involved in that way.

"Politics is acceptable as a career to anyone who is willing to work that hard," Reiser continued. "Perhaps it would be more acceptable if it were made easier work, but I do not, for one minute, favor that. Politics is not a dirty business. If you want to work long hours and are willing to give of yourself, you can participate in political activity without shaming yourself."

He said that young people must participate in politics along party lines, and a young person who thinks he is not being "just plain foolish. No matter what any pressure group or so-called 'independent' thinkers may say, politics is the art of accomplishment and the accomplishment vehicles are the two major political parties."

Disagreement with the political philosophy of the Democratic party was one reason which led to Hummel's involvement in Young Republic affairs in 1960.

He was also encouraged to participate in establishing a Young Republican Club in Jefferson County. He anticipated that farming would not "consume my total energy and political activity presented a challenge." Politics was also a frequent subject for table conversation with his family.

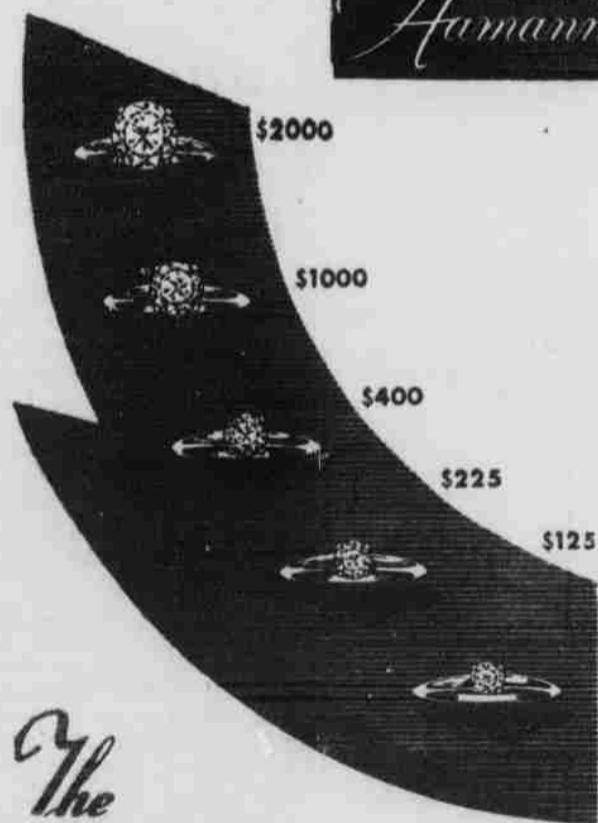
"My experience in politics has been most rewarding. I feel that progress has been made in many of the areas of political activity," he added.

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