On Politics and Public Service

by William M. Bulger

remarks delivered at a ceremony celebrating the tenth anniversary of the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs of the University of Massachusetts Boston and the establishment of the John Joseph Moakley Award for Distinguished Public Service.
The following address was given by Massachusetts Senate President William M. Bulger at the McCormack Institute’s Moakley Award Ceremony at the University of Massachusetts Boston on April 23, 1993.

My congratulations to the McCormack Institute on this, its tenth anniversary, for a decade of outstanding achievement. The scope and scholarship of the Institute's work is acclaimed nationally. All those whose research, analyses and expositions of social and political matters have contributed to better understanding of public issues and public service deserve individual citation.

But I cannot list them all in the time accorded me. And to mention only a few would be to exclude the others—which would be unjust. Accordingly, I commend the Institute and all its productive members, past and present.

There are few, if any, in this assembly who do not know of the statesman whom we honor today with the establishment by the Institute of the Moakley Public Service Award. To include Joseph Moakley's name and the words “public service” in the same title is an exercise in redundancy. They are synonymous.

I have followed Congressman Moakley's career with the greatest interest. When he was elected to the Massachusetts House, I was only weighing my political options, but when he moved on to the state Senate, I was elected to the House seat he vacated. When he ran for Congress, I was elected to his former seat in the state senate.

That partially explains why I maintain such a keen interest in his agenda.

There are a few more observations I would make about the congressman. But I have been asked to speak on the three themes of the Institute's tenth anniversary: The Political Process, The Role of the Politician in American Society, and The Importance of Public Service. Each theme is so vast that, like life itself, it invites either endless scrutiny or passing comment. Unless we are to grow old together, I am—to your relief, I trust—limited to the latter.
The first theme is the political process. That title provokes the question—which political process?

Those who would restrict our process to wealthy men and women who will take a sabbatical from their trust funds to perform public service are in fact proposing aristocracy. Perhaps they are the trail-blazers of oligarchy. They do not trust democracy.

Those who would guard against the human capacity for error by placing most decision making in the hands of experts are proposing elitism. That process amounts to a slow-motion overthrow of democracy. And it requires that you then find means to guard against the guardians, and then a way to guard against those who guard against the guardians—and so on ad infinitum.

Of course, those of us who remain committed to the democratic experiment must indulge a metaphysical belief in the communal wisdom of the people, however foolish or wicked we may perceive some individuals to be. It is, like all species of government, a theory—but there is much empirical evidence of its efficacy. At all events, it is what we have. It is the system in which most of us believe. Therefore it is the democratic process which I address.

It is a subject on which there is plentiful information—much of it well-intentioned, much of it wrong.

The process is not so simplistic as many self-styled reformers suggest. The clarity of their vision is unobscured by the complexities of the real world, their minds uncluttered by the hard lessons of experience.
It is not, on the other hand, so callous and heavy-handed as the system caricatured by cynics. Except in those instances, not infrequent, where you are dealing with ulterior motivation or entrenched ignorance, I suspect such commentators reveal more about themselves than the process they assail.

One of the founders of modern sociology accurately defined the political process as the slow boring of hard boards, requiring both passion and perspective. And, one might add, patience—dogged patience.

Consider the Massachusetts Senate, with which I have a passing familiarity. Some elements of the media portray it as an ovine body ruled, bullied and manipulated by a tyrannical president. That description of its process is, of course, absurd—as anyone who thinks about it logically must realize.

Begin with the fact that the purpose of a legislature is to legislate.

In the Massachusetts Senate that function must be exercised by forty men and women who have earned their places by earning the confidence of their constituents. They have strong convictions that have been challenged and debated, often in very spirited campaigns.

They have the confidence of winners. They have promises to keep and awareness that they must survive to keep them—and the knowledge that they must make an accounting within a very short time to the constituency to which those promises were made.

As a group, they are idealistic, industrious and resourceful—and their intelligence averages are high.
Surely it must be obvious that they cannot be tricked into abandoning their declared legislative goals. They cannot be jollied into jeopardizing their political careers. No one can bludgeon them into obedience. Any presiding officer who tried such tactics would, as history has made clear, be ignored and replaced.

*An effective presiding officer, therefore, is one who works to bring about the consensus necessary to accomplish legislation.* Except where matters of principle arise, and few differences of opinion among men and women of good will are of such grim proportion, the process must seek reasonable agreement.

And that is how the entire political process works—by consensus, not by insisting upon perfection, or nothing at all—since our diverse definitions of perfection militate against the productivity of that approach. And even if we were agreed, which we are not, on what constitutes perfection in government, its achievement, as a learned philosopher noted, requires the presence of certain natural advantages that may not presently exist. Progress consists in achieving the best result attainable. Politics remains “the art of the possible.”
The Institute's second theme is the role of the politician in American society.

One who would be a good and faithful servant to the public should possess the ancient qualifications noted by Marcus Aurelius—a disposition to do good, to give to others, and to cherish good hopes. And I would add that he or she must possess, or soon develop, a steadfastness of heart sufficient to sustain enthusiasm when initiatives are scorned, when justice is delayed, and even at times when hope, itself, seems to crumble. It is not for the weak of spirit.

The role of the politician is, of course, to represent his constituents and to serve their interests. But the ship of state is not propelled by slaves chained to oars of political policy. Your representative, as Burke put it, owes you not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

There are some, of course, who come to office unburdened by any aspirations loftier than security and advancement. They strive to dazzle and astonish by developing a pleasing and ubiquitous presence. It is not difficult for such people to become popular. If one panders to the media, seeks out each beneficial photo opportunity, and tells each interviewer precisely what the public wants to hear, it is actually difficult not to become popular. But the sincerity and basic worth of public servants is usually in inverse proportion to the number of press releases they disseminate.

Consider the man we honor today with the institution of a public service award. He seeks what might almost be described as an honorable obscurity. A Moakley press release, because of its rarity, is a collector's item. He is typical of those in public life who seek not to please the public, but to benefit the public. And that, as an English clergyman once observed, is a work fraught with difficulty and teeming with dangers. That has been true for millennia past. It is true today. It will be true tomorrow...and tomorrow...and tomorrow.
On the Importance of Public Service

The Institute's final theme is the importance of public service.

Every man and woman knows that public service is the engine of our political process. It is what drives it and makes it work. Thus it would seem that the only way one could discuss its importance would be to labor the obvious with an air of discovery.

I wish that were true. But it is not.

Indeed, no subject could be more timely.

It is not public service that is vital, it is good public service—and you cannot have good public service without good public servants.

But the fact is that men and women—good public servants—are leaving office in droves. Defections in the past few years—on both state and national levels—are of historic proportions. And there appear to be fewer persons in private life for whom public service holds allure.

The result, despite intensive efforts by both major parties to find candidates, is that a large number of office seekers in the last election were unopposed. We scoff at uncontested elections in totalitarian countries. We can view them with equanimity in our own nation only at our peril.

The men and women who turned their backs on public service exercised an option they had always had: They went, for the most part, to private positions of importance offering substantial increases in income. They are able to be problem-solvers in private business because they were problem-solvers in the business of the public, and they simply took that talent with them.
The loss of such people, such talent, poses a serious threat to the quality of public service. And I do not sense the fierce competition to replace them that used to exist when an incumbent retired.

What has caused this crisis? It is not the comparatively low income of public life. That is hardly new. It is not the unappreciated sweat and toil that goes with office. That is accepted. It is not the endless proliferation of rules and regulations that beset public servants, nor the constant scrutiny and display of their loans, investments, earnings and property. Such things can reach obnoxious levels, but they are necessary evils in many instances to protect the appearance, as well as the fact, of faithful public service.

No—the theme that ran through the explanations of all those I have questioned—and I have discussed the matter with a great many of these disenchanted men and women—was this: They quit because they would no longer pay the price demanded by public service in terms of harassment and risk of reputation.

The media have always criticized those in public office—and all save those public servants with extremely delicate sensibilities have recognized this as the proper role of a vigilant press. It was unimportant if the criticism was ill founded, for if the media are to be free, they must be free to make judgmental errors.

But what of the instance when the media attack one personally with defamatory falsehoods? Surely an innocent victim is entitled to exoneration.
And for almost ninety percent of our existence as a nation a public office holder, so injured, had the same recourse most of you in this audience have: He or she could sue in libel and the publisher was required to prove the truth of the defamatory allegation. The value of the libel law was not the money received in judgment—for it never fully atoned for the scarred reputation—but the fact that the liability for false defamation encouraged responsibility on the part of the press.

But the office holder no longer has the same rights most of you have.

The law of libel—so far as men and women in public office are concerned—has been changed. Stated briefly, the burden is now on the victimized public servant to prove the falsehood of the defamation. And to get the opportunity to undertake that bleak task he or she must first satisfy the court that it will be possible to prove that the publisher knew he was lying, or was pretty sure he was lying, at the time of the publication.

Thus, where the public servant is concerned, one must prove a negative. One must also convince a court that he or she has read the secret mind of the publisher and can prove its contents within the rules of evidence. As a practical matter this is virtually impossible unless the publisher is willing to testify against himself, which has not proved to be the common experience.

The media—where office holders are concerned—thus have been given a license to lie.

The practice has swelled like the crescendo in some nightmarish symphony. It is now commonplace for innocent public officials to be falsely defamed—their reputations shredded, their families ravaged—all to sell newspapers or improve broadcast ratings.
Some of these outrages are particularly malevolent: They are calculated campaigns of vilification, a merciless drumbeat of falsehoods that provide the basis for poisonous innuendo and cruel distortion—all deliberately contrived to destroy innocent men and women because they will not prostrate themselves before the media.

_That_ is why so many are leaving public life. _That_ is why many more will follow them.

Think of this, I beseech you. Think of it when you think of the political process, when you think of the role of the politician, when you think of the importance of public service. If we do not protect the reputations of innocent public servants, we will end in time with servants who have no reputations to protect. We will then have the quality of government our apathy deserves. I doubt that the most passionate champion of justice wants it under those circumstances.

This is an area where the McCormack Institute, with its talented human resources, with its capacity for research and analysis, with its ability to publish and disseminate, can make a significant contribution to the well-being of all Americans.
It is probable that everyone here knows the facts of Joseph Moakley’s background and career. They are impressive and worth knowing, but they reveal little about the man himself—little of who he is, of what he is, and of why. The answer lies to a great extent in understanding where he came from.

He lived at 51 Logan Way in South Boston. I lived at number 41. He was young and I was even younger, but he was my friend and I admired him greatly.

Our homes were situated in the Old Harbor Project, where the ambiance was rigorously urban—if less urbane than some other areas. But Joseph Moakley and I, like all around us, were not neighbors in a project, we were neighbors in a Neighborhood, a place of unique personality, something quite apart from being a mere section of a great city.

The Neighborhood known as South Boston, where the character of Joseph Moakley was shaped, was—as it still is—a place where roots ran deep, where traditions were cherished. It was, as it remains, a place of strong faith, of strong values, deeply held: commitment to the efficacy of work, to personal courage, to the importance of good reputation—and withal, to an almost fierce sense of loyalty.

No one spent much time talking of such things, but they were inculcated, somehow, even though to the outsider, then as now, only the blue collars and the quaint alphabet streets appeared to be noteworthy. The Neighborhood’s character—its ethos, if you will—seemed as inscrutable to them as the stars at noon.
No one absorbed those values more thoroughly than did Joseph Moakley. To understand them is to understand him. Even its ambiance was important—its fascination with politics. We enjoyed sports, we read books, we went to the movies. But politics was both a cottage industry and, I suppose, the nearest thing we had to a game show. Our lampposts were festooned with political placards. Soundtrucks rolled through our streets debating political issues. And we all dearly loved a grand parade.

We actually listened to the speeches. We actually read the handbills. We became devotees, critics, even connoisseurs of political exposition.

I think of all that when I remember walking on Carson Beach one afternoon with Joseph Moakley. Suddenly, without reference to anything we had been discussing, he said: “You know, Bill, I find political cards more interesting than baseball cards.” I sensed what that meant for him—and I knew, somehow, he spoke for me as well.

That moment is frozen in my mind as about the time when all that has followed began for both of us. I am mindful of T.S. Eliot’s metaphor on inspiration—when he wrote of a character walking on a beach and hearing mermaids singing, each to each. Well there were no mermaids near Carson Beach that day, but I knew with certainty that Joe clearly had heard the siren song of politics.

We are all better off because he heard that call.

And I am grateful to him for prompting me to listen and hear it, as well.

I thank you.
A native of South Boston, William M. Bulger attended Boston public schools and is a graduate of Boston College High School, Boston College, and Boston College Law School, where he earned his Juris Doctor Degree. Always a community leader, he entered the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1961; he was later elected to the Senate and has been its president since 1978. His legislative career has been highlighted by his work as chairman of committees of vital concern to the people of the Commonwealth: the Judiciary Committee, the Commission on Marine Boundaries and Resources, the Special Commission on Boston Harbor Pollution and Waterfront Development, the Special Commission on the Performing Arts, the Special Commission on Power Plant Siting, and the Joint Commission on Air Pollution.

Senate President Bulger and his wife, the former Mary Foley, reside on East Third Street in South Boston. The Bulgers have nine children.
This booklet has been published by the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs of the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Sherry H. Penney, Chancellor
University of Massachusetts Boston

Raymond G. Torto, Director
John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs

The John Joseph Moakley Award for Distinguished Public Service, whose first recipient was Congressman Moakley himself, will be presented each year by the McCormack Institute to a dedicated leader who has made significant contributions to the welfare of our state and nation.