

**Interview with former Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis
by John Weingart
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John Weingart: Governor Dukakis, thank you for taking the time to talk to us.

Michael Dukakis: It's good to be here.

John Weingart: I want to start by asking you about when you came back as governor. You'd served one term, and then you had four years off and you had an unusual opportunity to have a second chance to say, "If I could do it over again, I'd do it differently." What were the things you did differently, how did you approach it?

Michael Dukakis: I was elected as a young reformed Democrat who had been kind of the leader of the reformed Democrats in the Legislature, and I had come into a state government which was probably one of the three or four most corrupt state governments in the country at the time. It's hard to believe now, but that was Massachusetts. And so I and my approximately 25 reform Democratic colleagues in the Legislature, which was controlled by the Democrats, were constantly battling our own party leadership all the time, especially around these integrity issues and not just integrity issues. And I think that had a lot to do with the attitude I brought to the governor's office.

To say that I was not the favorite of the then-party leadership would be the understatement of the century, but strangely, though I'd been a legislator for eight years and a pretty effective legislator, I had terrible legislative relations. I really didn't understand, strange as it may sound, how you build strong relationships with your Legislature, and I wasn't much of a consensus-builder. And for my troubles, even though we did an awful lot during that first four years, I got tossed out of the place, and it was one of these elections where I was 40 points ahead with 5 weeks to go in the polls and I lost my own primary to this guy. I had a chance to teach over at the Kennedy School and kind of reflect on my errors and sins while governor, and when I came back, there's just no question I was a different guy in many ways, especially in understanding that the way you get things done is to be a consensus-builder. And I'm not talking about being a lowest-common denominator consensus-builder. I mean, I still had very forceful views, but what I really began to understand as a result of that defeat is if you've got to use your prestige, your position, to try to bring people to the table, all people, including the folks that disagree with you and especially legislators from the beginning-- and so in my second and third terms, we never began going down the policy road without doing that.

And these days I try to teach it to my students, who I hope are going to be good public servants. And the result was that we had really a remarkably successful run, got all kinds of stuff done and did it with very broadly based support, both inside and outside the State House.

John Weingart: So did that mean you would formulate policies less specifically until you talked to legislators or...?

Michael Dukakis: Yeah. I mean, for example, I signed the second universal health care bill in the country in 1988. Unfortunately, my successor did everything he could to screw it up and we never fully implemented it. Took us 20 years to get there again, but only Hawaii had moved on the health care front prior to Massachusetts, and I certainly started with the assumption that we were going to try to pass legislation and develop a health care system that would provide decent, affordable health care to every person in the state of Massachusetts. That was my goal, but that was it. I didn't have any preconceived notions about how to do it, what to do. Pulled together a very strong task force of broadly based folks and constituencies, went to work under a very able secretary of health and human services, who quarterbacked this whole effort, and came up with a bill, which was remarkably similar to the Nixon bill, which President Nixon submitted in the early '70s and which was adopted for the most part by Hawaii in 1975. But I certainly didn't enter that with any details. All I knew was it was time for Massachusetts, and I thought for the country, to do what every other advanced, industrialized nation in the world had done, and that is to guarantee decent, affordable health care to its people. And we came up with a successful bill and passed it and so forth, began implementing it. Unfortunately, I left office. I was succeeded by somebody who-- bright guy, but never understood health care, and while some of it was implemented, the full bill itself was not, but that was pretty typical.

Welfare to work, where I worked very closely with Governor Kean, with Governor Castle of Delaware and Bill Clinton of Arkansas. We were the four welfare-reform governors. All I knew was that the welfare system at the time was failing, that people were very angry about it, that it wasn't serving the folks who were on public assistance very well, and I basically said to my people, "Let's pull some folks together and let's see how we do this." And out of that came the famous Massachusetts ET program, which was really not very complicated. I mean, what was it? Training for real jobs, child care for those kids so the mothers could go into a training program, and we stopped cutting welfare mothers off of Medicaid the day they got a job, which is what we did back then. Great incentive, right? We want you to go to work, and, by the way, you're going to lose your health benefits for yourself and your kids. So you do so. That was the Massachusetts ET program. That

was hugely successful, but when we started that process, I basically turned to Manny Carballo, who was my secretary of health and human services at the time, and I said, "Manny, put a process together. Involve me as actively as you think I should be involved, and let's deal with this welfare problem in a way that's going to make it possible for these folks to become independent and self-sufficient and support themselves and their kids." So, it really worked for us.

John Weingart: There's a way that every state thinks it's unique. I wonder was that rare that you would work with governors from other states and learn from governor efforts in other states?

Michael Dukakis: I can only speak for myself. I had the rare opportunity to work with some terrific governors, at least three of whom served New Jersey. I was finishing up my term at the tail end of Jim Florio's first term, but Brendan Byrne and Tom Kean were close colleagues, valued friends. We philosophically agreed on just about everything. I mean, I don't remember any fundamental differences of philosophy with Tom and certainly not with Brendan. And I think all of us took our responsibilities both as members of the Coalition of Northeast Governors and the National Governors Association very seriously. I don't see as much of that these days as I would like to.

Mitt Romney basically walked out of the New England Governors' Conference, which I thought was stupid. I mean, New England is a region. I mean, what is the point of this? There are a lot of regional problems that've got to be dealt with, but Brendan and Tom and Jim understood the importance of the Northeast acting together, particularly when I was first elected, when they were calling us the New Appalachia and Frost Belt, Sun Belt and all that kind of stuff. And Hugh Carey played a major role in this, and it was then that we created the Coalition of Northeast Governors. So, we were not only friends, but we all thought that we could learn from each other, so maybe I was doing something on welfare reform. Tom was doing something on the arts. Hugh was doing something else, I mean, and we shared these experiences willingly and enthusiastically, and I'm not sure I see that these days. I'm certainly not seeing it in New England and in the Northeast generally. I mean, I think we have a huge agenda. I'm going to be talking about National Rail Passenger System. I don't have to tell you that the Northeast has enormous interest in this. I'm not seeing as much of the kind of close collaboration that I think we had back when I was governor among the region's governors, and I think that's very important.

John Weingart: Let me shift gears. I want to ask you about whether there were policies or initiatives that you pursued as governor that grew out of particular experiences you'd had before you were in politics, and I'm thinking-- we recently had a program here to talk about Governor Kean's role in the arts, and one of the things that influenced him was going to Teachers College in New York when Lincoln Center was being built and seeing the construction, seeing the economic impacts. Is there anything like that for you?

Michael Dukakis: I don't think any question that the personal experiences and background of elected officials have an enormous amount to do with what they believe is important, and I don't care who you are. Mike Huckabee was the great anti-obesity guy. Why? Because he was 290 pounds and he was diagnosed with Type-2 diabetes and he kind of said, "Hey, I better get serious, and if I'm getting serious and I want to be an example, then I got to do this." And philosophy and ideology seemed to go out the window.

Look, I'm the son of immigrants. My father and his family settled in Lowell, Massachusetts, a textile town, my mother in Haverhill, a shoe town. I knew those communities. By the time I got into the Legislature in the '60s, the older industrial communities in Massachusetts, like the old industrial communities in New Jersey, were in terrible shape and nobody was doing anything about it. And so the fact that one of the centerpieces of my economic policies was to go back into those communities and help to revive them had everything to do with my background.

Speaking of the arts, the first bill I ever got through the Legislature was a bill creating a state council on the arts. How come? Well, I was the first chair in the trumpet section of the Brookline High School band, but I married the daughter of Harry Ellis Dixon, a member of the first violin section of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the associate conductor of the Boston Pops under Arthur Fiedler. I mean, you couldn't marry into the symphony and not be concerned about the arts.

The welfare-to-work thing? I mean, I think there was a kind of an ethic thing there. I mean, Greeks are workers. We believe in work. We come over here and you work seven days a week in the restaurant or something and whatever. And it just seemed to me that having thousands and thousands of mostly single mothers with their kids on public assistance was a terrible response to the issue that we faced. What could we do to change that? And the health care thing unquestionably came out of my background. I mean, for one thing, I'm a failed premed. My dad, who was this remarkable guy, came over from predominantly Greek western Turkey at the age of 15 in 1912, didn't have a nickel in his pocket, couldn't speak a word of

English, had a couple of older brothers working in the textile mills in Lowell and 12 years later graduated from Harvard Medical School. And how he did it, I have no idea, but he practiced medicine for 52 years. I mean, I grew up in the family of an old-fashioned general practitioner, who if you could pay him, you paid him; if you couldn't pay him, he took care of you anyway, did his own surgery, must've delivered 2,000 to 3,000 babies. And I was kind of the heir apparent until I ran into something called general physics at Swarthmore College and came to the conclusion that there was a part of my brain marked physics that was missing.

But, as the son of a doctor who provided that kind of health care to people, I could not understand why this great country seemed incapable of making it possible for all Americans to have decent, affordable health care, and I just felt very strongly about that. And I don't think there's any question it came right out of my background as the son of a doctor who had a very ethnic practice in many ways. Seven days a week I remember him getting out of bed at two in the morning and going to the hospital and coming back and saying, "Michael, I just brought another child into the world," and there's no question that had a huge impact on me. So, that's a long way of saying those personal experiences are very, very important to you. Kitty's interest in refugees and immigrants had a huge influence on me.

John Weingart: There's lots more I'd like to ask, but let me just throw in one more question. How did you think about the role of the cabinet as opposed to the role of your staff?

Michael Dukakis: I'm a big cabinet guy. I had a very thin staff. I did not want a lot of special policy assistants around me, and I used to say this over and over again. My first team when it comes to policy is my cabinet, those folks who walk in the door any time they want, didn't need appointments or any of these kind of thing. We worked very, very closely together, but I'm not a fan of an executive office in which you have a cabinet and then you have all these smart young folks running around who really haven't managed much, trying to second-guess. So I had very, very few policy assistants in my office.

John Weingart: And then were your cabinet members reasonably free to appoint their own executive staff, or were you involved with that? How did that work?

Michael Dukakis: Sure. I mean, look. I wanted to have some input over, but for one thing-- and I teach this-- no public manager ever ought to take a job where it isn't clear that in the last analysis he or she doesn't have final authority for picking

key people. Now, there could be lots of collaboration. I have no problem with governor's offices referring good candidates for positions down to cabinet secretaries, but if the cabinet secretary ultimately hasn't made that decision, then how do you hold him or her accountable? Little embarrassing when he or she screws up and you get up and say, "Well, see, I didn't pick this person. The governor's office forced me to take them." I mean, you just can't do that, and I was a big fan of cabinet secretary accountability. I mean, these were my top team. I picked them carefully.

Fortunately, I had a terrific team, but no excuses but plenty of collaboration, obviously, and not just a question of hiring, I mean, in terms of policy and this kind of thing. I mean, I had regular cabinet meetings every two weeks, and they were not just coffee-and-doughnut sessions. I mean, they were working sessions, but I was very close to my cabinet and they to me, and I might've had three staff people on my executive staff who had broad policy responsibility. It was mostly to coordinate the work of the cabinet secretaries, and it seemed to work well for me.

Now, I know the President of the United States has got all these policy czars. Well, he's there. He got elected; I didn't, so my hat's off to him, but I wouldn't have operated that way. Seems to be the same is true of a president. You have a fairly limited number of people coordinating the activities of the cabinet secretaries, but you want those cabinet secretaries to be very close to you, and at least from my standpoint I didn't want a lot of people between me and my cabinet. I wanted that relationship to be very close, and it was, and it seemed to work.

John Weingart: Good. Well, Governor, thank you so much for your time. It's been great.

Michael Dukakis: Glad to be here.

John Weingart: Thank you.