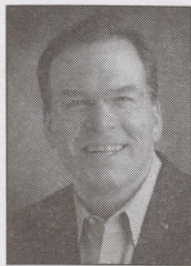


The legacy of Barney Frank



Nick Fish is a Portland city commissioner

BY NICK FISH
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

I remember the first time I met Barney Frank.

It was the summer of 1980, during his first campaign for Congress. I was a 21-year-old college student. Barney was different: a smart, funny, principled, disheveled and fearless liberal.

There was a big and noisy fight going on in our country — between a Reagan vision that government was the problem and a progressive vision that government could be a positive force in people's lives.

Barney stood for something. He championed causes that mattered to ordinary people and had no time for cynicism and despair. He inspired me to believe we could change the world for the better.

Thirty-five years later, we face new challenges in our country. Inequality of income and power. A "one strike and you're out" economy. Growing doubts whether the next generation will achieve the "American Dream." Too many people who feel they don't have a voice in our government.

Congress no longer functions as a great deliberative body. Social media, a great innovation, is frequently used as a forum for ugliness and hate. There is too much heat, and not enough light. And progressives often are their own worst enemy.

How do we renew our democracy and honor Barney's legacy?

For starters, we need to demand that our politicians — candidates and elected officials — tell us what they stand for, not just what they are against.

It is not enough to complain about the status quo. Leaders have a special obligation to lay out a positive vision — and to be clear about what they are willing to fight for.

Next, we need to remember to celebrate our progress, and to avoid overstating our failures.

Steve Jobs arguably was the most successful technology entrepreneur in my lifetime. In his autobiography, he credits his copious mistakes and personal setbacks with Apple's ultimate success. As Thomas Edison once said, "I have

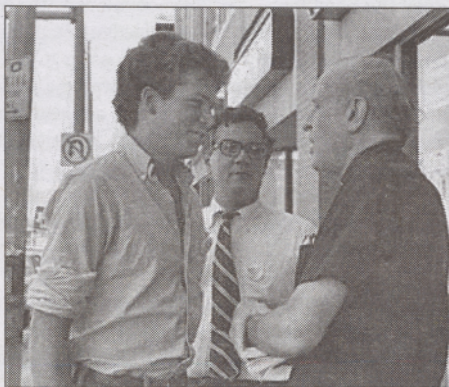


PHOTO BY RICHARD SOBOL

Barney Frank (center), then a candidate for Congress, is pictured with a college-age Nick Fish in 1980.

not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

I understand why people who are philosophically opposed to an activist government reflexively criticize government, but I don't understand why so many progressives join the chorus. Why are they predisposed to see the cup as chronically half-empty?

Two recent examples illustrate my point.

The Arts Education & Access Fund (known to most as the Arts Tax) was adopted in 2012 by 62 percent of Portland voters. Like many new initiatives, it had its challenges getting up and running.

Now, collections are up, and the funds are making a big difference. This school year, the Arts Tax funded 70 teachers in six public school districts, serving over 30,000 children.

Time to celebrate our progress, right? Certainly not! According to a well-known local musician and original supporter of the Arts Tax, it has been an "(expletive deleted) disaster." And he delivered his harsh judgment in a recent issue of "Artslandia," the program distributed to patrons of the arts.

Or take homelessness. Over the past decade, local government, nonprofits, business, philanthropy and the faith community linked arms and worked tirelessly to address chronic

homelessness. While it remains a persistent national problem, in Multnomah County, we helped 13,000 people move from the streets to homes.

A glimmer of hope in a dark world? Of course not! According to a respected housing advocate quoted in Anna Griffin's thoughtful series in The Oregonian on homelessness, "Anybody who can look in the mirror and say we haven't collectively failed is kidding themselves."

The Arts Tax a "(beeping) disaster." The efforts of a community coalition to end homelessness a "collective failure." Rather than prematurely declare defeat, why not acknowledge our progress, and then challenge each other to do better?

What if progressives spent less time cataloging problems, and more time working on solutions? What if we spent less time forming a circle and shooting at each other, and more time building bridges of understanding? What if we committed to rebuilding our civic life on a strong foundation of what President Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature"?

And that brings me back to Barney Frank.

He understood that successful leaders need to be principled and pragmatic. He was a partisan who worked with political adversaries to get things done. He believed in our democratic institutions, in us, and never lost faith in our collective ability to achieve progress. And through his public service, he made a real difference.

As the first openly gay member of Congress, Barney led the fight for equality. Today, a majority of Americans and 37 states agree with him that everyone should have the right to marry — regardless of sexual orientation. He worked with a secretary of the Treasury from a Republican administration to prevent our economy from going over a cliff during the Great Recession. He authored the strongest consumer protection laws in a generation. And he believed passionately that low-income Americans should have a decent place to call home.

Barney is now retired from Congress, happily married and the author of a new autobiography. Thirty-five years after we first met, he continues to inspire me in my public service.

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