



“NO HOLDS BARRED” GEORGE MITCHELL AT THE CAMDEN CONFERENCE

In the first seven years of the Camden Conference’s existence, former Maine Senator George Mitchell, who recently returned to private life after serving as President Obama’s Middle East envoy, participated twice as a panelist. His first appearance was at the fourth conference, in 1991, which had as its overall theme “The Global Environment: A Foreign Policy Agenda”. The topic of the panel on which Mitchell served, along with German Green Party official Udo Knapp and Alvaro Ugalde, of the Costa Rican Ministry of Natural Resources, was “Who’s Legislating the Global Environment”. Rushworth Kidder of the Institute for Global Ethics was the panel moderator.

Although the Mitchell panel was only one of five major events at the Conference, it received the lion’s share of attention from the local journalists who covered the event. Indeed, it was not clear from the accounts in the Bangor Daily News and other local papers whether their reporters even attended most of the other sessions (although one commentator did say that he found the opening public forum “Foreign Policy Implications of Global Climate Change” to be “rather dull”). At the time of the Conference, Mitchell’s national prominence was at a high point due to his role, as Senate Majority Leader, in the lead up to the Gulf War – Mitchell was on the losing side of the 52-47 vote in the Senate authorizing the war, which occurred less than one month before the Conference’s opening.

Reporters at the event, as well as the authors of the Camden Conference’s published summary of its first five conferences, were especially struck by the exchanges between Mitchell and Knapp, described by some as “no holds barred”. Unfortunately, no transcript of this panel has survived, but it seems clear from the various press accounts that Knapp provoked Mitchell by referring to a clean air bill that Mitchell was sponsoring as “the same old stuff” and insisting that the “real question” was not the environment at all, but the creation of a “new society” not based on capitalism. Mitchell responded that the slow pace of change was indeed frustrating, but that it constituted the “price of democracy”. He then pointed out, perhaps somewhat sharply, that Knapp’s party did not hold a single seat in the Bundestag. “Do you want to make a policy statement or do you want to make a law?” Mitchell concluded.

No punches were thrown, and one of the reporters even characterized the exchange as “polite”, but the episode illustrates that the illumination emanating from the Camden Conference sometimes takes the form of sparks.

~ Robert Rackmales, August 2011

Bob Rackmales, a retired Foreign Service officer, is a member of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, the Camden Conference Advisory Council and Community Events Committee, and the Board of Trustees of the Belfast Senior College.