

ON GATE-KEEPERS AND PRAGMATISTS

At the beginning of Obama's term, when he talked about governing as a pragmatist, I perhaps foolishly believed he meant not pragmatism as DC understands it—as a principle-less squishy middle—but as the Pragmatist school of philosophers would mean it—as someone fundamentally open to and respectful of the ideas and viewpoints of all. Mind you, it was clear that his top advisors—especially David Axelrod—used the word pragmatist in the tired old DC way. But out of whatever idealism or naivete, I believed a smart guy from Hyde Park like Obama, who fancied himself an education reformer, couldn't help but to have internalized the tradition of Dewey.

Thus far in Obama's term, it hasn't worked out that way.

That's because, regardless of what Obama believes or has internalized, Big-P Pragmatism requires a certain kind of process—an openness to multiple viewpoints—and such process has not existed because of the gate-keepers at Obama's White House thus far.

Now, to Obama's credit, every single account of Obama's decision-making includes some description of what a good listener he is. There's always the scene where Obama listens intently to the disparate viewpoints on a subject, makes those people believe he has heard them with respect, and then makes his decision.

There are the multiple stories that relate events that take place before such sessions, wherein someone—most often Larry Summers but also Rahm—instructs a person in no uncertain terms that they will not be able to present their viewpoint to the President. There are even stories about minor progressive successes—such as Elizabeth Warren getting Obama's support for the Consumer Finance Protection Board—that

include a person finding a clever way around Summers or Rahm.

Now there's always the very real possibility that for all that Obama fancies himself a Pragmatist, his unacknowledged very real ideological stances won the day. It may well be that Obama will never succeed in behaving as a Pragmatist because he's just a lot more ideologically centrist than he thinks he is.

But a significant part of the problem is that for most of his term (I suspect, but don't know, that Pete Rouse was much better on this point), he has had gate-keepers who either are fundamentally ideological beings (Summers) or are the squishy DC kind of pragmatist (Rahm), who prevented him from pursuing a process that allows real pragmatism.

Which brings us to Bill Daley.

I oppose Bill Daley because he has been, ideologically, on the wrong side of just about every issue. I oppose him because the last thing Obama needs is another bankster in the White House. I oppose him because the optics are horrible. I oppose him because when the next JPMorgan scandal hits—there are a number brewing—it will taint the White House by association.

But given my understanding of Obama's failed pragmatism, I do take Howard Dean's comments on Daley seriously.

The core issue is the contempt that not just the progressives were treated by—a lot of people were treated by—a bunch of senior advisors around the President who've been here for 20 years and thought they knew everything and we knew nothing.

[snip]

It was more than just Gibbs or Rahm, it was the whole mindset that was going on there. That will change dramatically

especially if Bill Daley comes in, who I don't agree with a lot of stuff politically but I do think a) he's a grown-up and b) he gets that you don't treat people like you know everything and they don't.

Now, Dean **is** a pragmatist (though with none of the intellectual conceit about being one that Obama has). And so while I disagree with Dean's characterization that Daley qualifies as someone from outside of Washington, I am very struck by Dean's description of contempt being the key issue here.

The Chief of Staff's job is to serve as a gate-keeper. Any Chief of Staff (or Economic Advisor in Summers' case or Vice President in Cheney's) can use that position to ensure that only their ideologically-favored choices are presented to the President. Or he (always he, it seems) can make an effort to serve the President's claim to real pragmatism.

I'm not all that optimistic about Daley. All the myth-making about Obama's bad relationship with the business community and the seeming certainty that hiring a bankster like Daley will fix that suggests that the whole point of this is about even further narrowing the ideological gate through which ideas and people get presented to the President.

But it is true that Obama's real skill at listening isn't worth a damn thing if Rahm or Summers are guarding his door. Let's hope Daley will change that.