

House Committee on Rules

Testimony of Annette Talbott in Favor of HCR 32

March 25, 2019

Mr. Chairman and members,

Thank you very much for taking the time to honor a dedicated public servant, former House Speaker and Senator Grattan Kerans. I am submitting a short statement from the family thanking you all, with a special thanks to Chairman Holvey for introducing this resolution. They were not able to join you today but they will be here for the House Floor session next week.

Grattan was a dedicated public servant for over two decades including his service in the Oregon House and Senate and his work in Government Relations for the Oregon University System. His dedication to public service was driven in part from his Mother, an attorney and activist, and his grandfather, Eugene Grattan Kerans, who served in the Franklin Roosevelt administration in several political positions including speechwriter.

Grattan was first elected to the House in 1974 as a Democrat from Lane County. He was quickly recognized for his leadership skills becoming the Majority Whip in his second term. In his third and fourth terms in the House, he served as the Majority Leader. In his fifth term, he was elected as Speaker of the House.

I had the pleasure of working for Senator Kerans as Committee Counsel to the Senate Labor Committee and the Ethics, Elections and Campaign Finance Committee. He hired me fresh out of law school. I have had several jobs in my career since that time but I can say without a doubt that he has been my favorite boss. While he expected you to meet his high standards and be dedicated to the legislative process, he was generous and kind and a man of high integrity. He inspired and mentored many staff and members over the years in both their professional and personal lives. He used his time in public service to fight for economic and social justice legislation. He leaves a legacy of laws protecting workers, consumers, seniors, the disabled, and students as well as others protecting the environment.

He always said his job was to “fight the good fight,” even if you didn’t always win. He would often follow that up with “at least on the first try.” This was an important life lesson for me to learn that standing up for what you believed in was the right thing to do even if you might fail. There were those who did not agree with him but they always knew what he stood for and why. His strength and integrity were inspiring and he was admired by many.

As Chairman, he often challenged those with differing opinions on legislation to find compromise. He was famous for telling lobbyists disagreeing over amendments – “to go out in the hall” and see if you can work it out and come back in and tell me when you have. It was generally understood that if you did not reach agreement, the bill would not move out of committee. This was particularly challenging because he often sent me out in the hall with them to help develop the compromise language. I continue to use the negotiation skills I honed out in the hall to address legal and public policy issues.

In running the committees, he expected the lobby to know what they were talking about and he would skillfully and thoroughly question them to see if they did. Many asked me where he went to law school, I would laugh and note he was not a lawyer but add that he would have been a better one than many attorneys I practiced law with over the years.

Another lesson in legislating I learned from him was to never be afraid to stand alone. He would never hesitate to be the solo "No" vote on a bill if he thought it was just taking the law in the wrong direction. He was also very forward thinking. We passed legislation to prohibit genetic testing for employment purposes decades before it was common because he thought it was a horrible trend to try to deny someone a job for their genes when the tests only show a possibility of getting a disease.

He wasn't afraid of tackling hard issues or leading on issues that had public support but were controversial "inside the building." He fought hard for ballot access for third parties, even though he was clearly aligned with one of the two major parties. He worked hard to pass campaign finance legislation in the Senate in 1993. He referred to it as doing the people's business. He felt strongly that democracy was at risk by the corrupting force of money.

While in the Senate, he championed dozens of bills to protect workers and their families. This included first in the nation legislation that became a model for the rest of the country including the Oregon Family Medical Leave law which grew from parental leave to pregnancy disability and sick kid leave. He expanded whistleblowing protections for both public and private sector workers. He worked hard to protect injured workers and their re-employment rights and to pass civil rights and farmworker protections. I later had the pleasure of serving as Deputy Labor Commissioner and helped enforce those very laws. As a member of the Ways & Means Committee, Grattan also worked tirelessly to increase funding for health and safety programs, senior services and higher education.

His work to protect Oregon's environment was something I watched from afar but was always impressed by it. He worked to restrict field burning with a colleague from across the aisle after the terrible accident on I-5; it was a public health and environmental issue that he felt desperately needed to be addressed for his constituents and the state. He fought hard to preserve watersheds, safeguard drinking water, tried to ban ozone-depleting chemicals and put aside funds to clean up Superfund sites.

He pressed for strong laws to protect the integrity and transparency in elections and governance. He often recited famous quotes and had Bartlett's Familiar Quotations on his shelf. He was fond of the quote that "sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants" from U.S. Supreme Court Justice Brandeis. He raised critical issues in the legislative arena and proudly pursued the people's initiative process if they failed in the building including work on measures for the Citizen's Utility Board, Oregon Minimum Wage increases and indexing, and Campaign Finance reform.

Grattan had a great sense of humor and a wonderful smile and laugh. He was an outstanding orator who gave powerful floor speeches, often without any notes. The chamber would become quite quiet to listen to him passionately articulate why he was urging you to vote "aye" or seeking your "nay" vote on bills he thought should die. I suspect he changed votes on the floor with several speeches.

And most notable in today's sometimes polarized political environment, he was a statesman who respected the legislative process, his colleagues, the press, staff members and those he was elected to serve. He wanted Oregon government to be open and accessible to all; he would often ask the committee members to stay well into the evening to make sure that all the members of the public who came to testify on critical legislation could be heard.

In closing, I would ask the Committee to adopt HCR-1 Amendment before voting the bill out of the committee. It adds a reference to Grattan's 12 nieces and nephews and his sisters who predeceased him.

Thank you again for taking the time to honor Grattan's public service.