

Transcript Policy 360

Episode 53

Kelly Brownell: Welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Today I am pleased to welcome Barney Frank to the program.

Barney is a Democrat. He spent 32 years in Congress and served, most recently, as the ranking member of the House Financial Services Committee. One of his most important achievements was sponsoring the 2010 Dodd-Frank Act which resulted in sweeping reform of the United States financial industry and led to improved financial stability and consumer protection. He's also one of the most prominent gay politicians in the United States. Barney married his husband Jim a year before retiring from Congress. He is the author of four books including *A Memoir Frank*, *A Life in Politics* from the Great Society to Same-sex Marriage.

Welcome to Policy 360.

Barney Frank: Thank you.

Brownell: Thank you so much for joining us. So recently you wrote an op-ed for CNBC titled "I Am starting to wonder which side Trump is rooting for in 2018." What do you mean by that?

Frank: He's an extraordinary figure. He is clearly not interested in governing. I don't think he would be capable of governing if he was interested, but it does strike me when he complains when things aren't accomplished - he is not someone who spends his time trying to move public policy. He makes statements, he he blames other people. And I was particularly struck, first of all, before that, by the extent to which he has been relentless in his criticism of his own party's control of Congress.

I can tell you Democrats are very much encouraged by that. You're own local area Congressman , David Price, is one of the leaders of the intellectual approach of the Democratic Party. He's been working on this.

You have the Republican president telling people how terrible of the Republican Congress is; specifically denouncing the Republicans generally denigrating the Congress. And it is very unusual, I can tell you the Democrats are heartened by that. But then you have this extraordinary situation earlier where he met with Senator Schumer and Representative Pelosi, the former speaker, and agreed with them, conspicuously cutting off his own and Secretary Treasury, disagreeing with others. And then shortly after that agreeing again and giving her credit for moving him on the whole question of the immigration status of people were brought here when they were too young to make a decision. And the point I made is this: the strategy of either party is always to kind of demonize the leader of the other party. The Republicans went after Tip O'Neill, we went after New Gingrich, I must say with very good reason in my judgment. I do know that the Republican playbook had been to attack Nancy Pelosi. She's a very able woman but she is first of all a woman - the only woman be in a high position like this. And you can't underestimate, we that last year, the sexism involved. She's also from San Francisco which is an easily caricatured place by the Republicans. And I do know that the Republican playbook for next year was to say, "Oh don't vote for the Democrat for the House. He'll do what Nancy Pelosi says." Well now Donald Trump giving that answer. Oh, you mean I'll follow Nancy Pelosi like Donald Trump? Maybe he just wasn't thinking about it at all, and that's possible with him. But if he was given this any thought at all, his embrace of Nancy Pelosi - he's giving her credibility. He de-demonizing her. Obviously hurts the Republicans. And I now think - and I think you see with Bannon. Bannon is not interested in electing Republicans, he's interested in defeating Republicans he doesn't like. I think in Trump's mind he's been disappointed by not getting more done. He would be just as happy running for re-election in 2020 as the victim of

a Democratic House, maybe even happier than being held accountable for the failure of a Republican House.

[00:03:57] Brownell: So, interesting. So, there's been a lot of talk about polarization in modern politics. And we could talk for hours about this but if there are a few things you could do to help reverse that trend what would it be?

[00:04:10] I would encourage Republicans who do not believe in this hard-edged angry, negative approach to vote in their primaries. This wasn't always the case. I was the chairman of the Financial Services Committee of the U.S. House in 2007 and 2008. That was when we began to see financial trouble. I worked hard with Henry Paulson and Ben Bernanke, the two Bush appointees in charge. By the fall of 2008 Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid, the Democratic leaders, two fairly partisan people (appropriately so) instructed Senator Dodd and myself as the chairs of the committees to work with the Bush administration. The Democrats gave the Bush administration a great deal of support in 2008 on our common ground. Then when the Republicans took over and I have to tell you this is not a two-sided thing -- Democrats have gotten sharper in response. But what happened was the Republicans moved to the right. And in particular after Obama took over, frustratingly for us, the Republican Party decided to blame Obama for the Bush administration approach to the financial crisis and the key was - during 2010 Republicans who were not extreme and not hyper-partisan were defeated in primaries. Two prominent senators - former Senator Robert Bennett of Utah, former Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas - they lost an intra-party Republican efforts because they weren't partisan enough. In 2007, I got a foretaste of that when I pushed a bill as a chairman of the committee to ban subprime loans to people who shouldn't get them. And the Republican leader of the committee at the time, Spencer Baucus, sided with us and he was then told by the Republican leadership in the House, "Don't you ever side with them again, they're our enemy." So I have to say this is a partisan answer to that question. The Republican Party lurched sharply to the right and the Democrats have been responding to that. But the answer to what - to get back to where we were under George W. Bush when there was a different deal but cooperation, the non-Tea-Party Republicans, the non-angry, divisive Republicans have to take back their party.

Brownell: So, you're well-known for your use of humor in politics. So why is that and how do you think your humor has helped you work effectively with others?

Frank: To be honest, the first reason I use humor is because I enjoy it. I mean have a very low boredom threshold. I think of things that seem to really be funny because I like that. But beyond that it's a very effective tool in debate. If you say something very funny it is likelier to be remembered. That's especially the case if you can make a polemical point in a humorous way - both because it is more likely to be remembered and because nobody likes to be laughed at. So, you may deter people in that. And frankly also the fact that I'm lucky enough to be able to think of fairly funny things on the spur of the moment made me more effective in debate. I want to disclaim here. I do have a reputation for being very funny, I appreciate. It's probably because I'm being judged by an easier standard. I have never been a standup comic and that's very tough. It's very daunting to go to an audience full of people who paid you \$50 or \$100 dollars and they say, "OK I've paid you a lot of money, make me laugh..." That's hard. In my situation, I am in the midst of what many people find tense, boring, they wish they weren't there. And if I can say something with reasonably funny, it comes as a pleasant surprise. So, I always -- there's nothing like low expectations to foster success.

Brownell: So, in your memoir you tell a very moving story about coming out of the closet. Would you share that story with us please?

Frank: Yes, when I first decided I was interested in politics I was 13 years old and I accepted the

fact that everybody hated gay people I knew I was gay. We didn't call it gay then, this was 1953. But to be in politics you had to be popular, to be gay was to be unpopular. So, for years I thought about, "well how am I going to work this out?" As time went on it was an interesting thing in which being gay became less and less unpopular, being in government became more and more unpopular - - by the time I left office, I mean this quite seriously, being gay was more socially acceptable than being a Congressman. My marriage is Jim, the only marriage still that a member of Congress had to come out of the same sex, was more popular than anything I did as a legislator and including the financial reform phone bill. But by the 80s I decided this wasn't going to work. When I first ran for office my compromise to myself was, "Well I want to get elected to office." There were things I wanted to do. I would enjoy it. There's a vision of society I want to fight for. But if I'm honest about my sexuality I can't win. So, I won't tell people that I'm gay. I won't lie about it, say I'm straight (or I once did to my regret.) But on the other hand, I'm never going to back away from being an advocate. I'm not going to be a hypocrite. I think you have a right to privacy but to hypocrisy. And I thought, "OK I'll be publicly closeted, privately active." Didn't work.

The disparity between a very satisfactory public life and a miserable, deprived, unhappy private life was bothering me. And finally [I said] I've got to end this. So, by 1987 my seventh year in Congress I said, "You know what, I think I'm going to be OK, I think I'll get re-elected." But the deprivation of my private life, the unhappiness that I felt was such that even if it cost me my job, your job's not worth your life.

Brownell: And how did you experience the reaction when you did come out?

Frank: It was a very pleasant surprise. And there was a perception that it was going to hurt me politically correct. Tip O'Neill was a wonderful, progressive, great force in America (the former speaker of the House) who was personally very supportive. But when I told a friend of his, the political journalist Mike Barnicle (who's seen still today on Morning Joe) and in his Boston accent he said, "Michael, old pal. I'm afraid our friend Barney Frank is all through in politics." And [Mike Barnicle] said, "Why?" And [Tip O'Neill] said, "Well, I hear he's going to come out of the room."

Brownell: (chuckles) Come out of the room.

Frank: Tip always got the music right, he didn't always get the words right. And I lot of my straight friends, liberal friends, the liberals in Congress who were great advocates for gay rights which we were then debating still send to me, "Please don't do that. You're an effective ally, we don't want you marginalized." So that was one the perception I might lose. [But] I knew that wasn't going to happen, but there was still the sense, well, once you're seen as gay that will just overwhelm other aspects of your persona.

You will be a weaker advocate elsewhere. And I couldn't deny that I just had to say to them, "Hey look, ff that's the price I'll pay it because I can't live this way." And then it turned out that was wrong - that the public was more ready for it. And I will tell you I decided at the time after doing some polling and we polled after I came out before the election of that year, and it said 44% of the people answered the question, they thought I'd be hurt because people knew I was gay. But only 22 percent were themselves personally upset. And it and it struck me that the average American was less homophobic than he thought he was supposed to be. Sadly, more racist than he was prepared to admit. And I've seen that continue to play out.

Brownell: Well thank you. You're due to give a talk entitled The Fight for a Fairer Society is Pragmatism a Betrayal. So, what do you think - is pragmatism and betrayal?

Frank: No. Quite the opposite. The absence of pragmatism that is a betrayal not in the sense that it

portrays bad motives but it renders your advocacy of your ideals impotent. No unrealized ideal ever fed a hungry child or avoided a war or prevented a river from being polluted or did else useful. But there is this notion that some younger people are [untintelligible] part of the campaign and I worry about is when both sides you have Steve Bannon other right promulgating that, although frankly, that's fine with me because he's hurting his own on Republicans. But on the left what I fear is this polarization where Democrats who are trying to take reality into account and do the best they can given political constraints will be attacked by people who think that they are compromising not because they are accommodating reality but because they are saying people out. I am very afraid that you will see a series of litmus tests. I make this distinction. I think people who try to get Democratic candidates to be further left on issues like health care are substantively correct - that's where I am. What I fear is that you'll have people say, "Oh if you're not for a single payer system right away then we're not going to be supporting you." And that's - that's damaging. But it also means you don't get anything done. I mean you start with your ideas but it does seem to be the more deeply committed you are to your ideals, the more you are to implement them. What makes me fight right now is the Internet and media in general. Increasingly today (maybe not increasingly but it's a fact) the most active people politically tend to listen or read or watch only those media outlets with which they agree. So, you have on both the left and the right, the most energized segments, people who believe that the rest of the world agrees with them. They believe their positions on majoritarianism even when they may not be. So, and those people in elected office who have the responsibility for trying to implement these ideas, on either the left or the right, say to their harshest, strongest partisans "We didn't have the votes to do that" they're not believed. People [say] "Oh, you just sold us out."

And explain to people that pragmatism is an essential way of getting your ideas implemented. It's always been important but I think the tensions on the Democratic side of the Sanders-Clinton campaign and Bannon, that's exacerbated right now and I am afraid that there is a danger that you will have this rejection of pragmatism. But it's always going to be the case that people can decide that the pragmatic decision in the particular case was based on inaccurate facts of that case, that it was a wrong judgment. But there is a growing view that people who will in fact embrace that are disloyal, that it's a betrayal, and I find that threatening to any chance of social change.

Brownell: So, you recently had some pointed words for younger voters who supported Bernie Sanders and say that they are disaffected with today's Democratic Party. And you said, quote, "their disaffection with the Democrats is probably not as great as my disaffection with them." What did you mean by that?

Frank: They're the ones who put Gorsuch on the Supreme Court. They're the ones who got us to withdraw from the Paris Peace Accord. This notion that you have this level of perfection and if you don't get it you're not going to be supportive. It's just outrageous. I don't understand how anybody can look now at what Donald Trump is doing and justify having either voted for him in some extreme cases, or not voted against him. This is -- and I'm not going to, "What are you going to do to make them feel better?" No, I want them to understand what damage they have inflicted on people.

When Jeff Sessions reverses what he says he will do with regard to law enforcement, and he's going to drop any effort to try to improve the way in which police officers deal with African-Americans and fight against some of those -- people, that's their fault, that's their conscious choice. And it's not a surprise it's not as if they couldn't see that coming. So, I am very angry at those people whose stiff-necked, unrealistic need to feel totally morally superior to everybody else including reality gave us Donald Trump.

Brownell: So, what are you proudest of in your career?

Frank: Well it's something emotional to talk about. I will tell you there's one aspect that I put -- as you know a lot of things to get attention. I worked very hard for 33 years to build rental housing for low-income people. I mean I think that's one of the great causes that liberals ignore. I feel good about how we've been able to play a part in the advancement of equal treatment for LGBT people. and yeah, the financial reform bill I thought was an appropriate way to do it. But I also hope I've shown people - because I'm substantively pretty much on the left on public policy issues (although I do believe that the market has a use if you are careful about it). And I guess these days I think the most important thing is to say, "You know what, I have had a pretty good record on racial issues. I think I've been as much of an advocate for LGBTQ equality as anybody else." And I think I've been able to show that you can do that. That being concerned about effectiveness doesn't mean that you lose your moral compass.

Brownell: Well thank you for all you've accomplished in elected office and we look forward to all you'll accomplish going forward. Thank you very much for joining us.

Frank: Thank you, Dean. Appreciate it.

Brownell: So, I've been talking today with Barney Frank. We'll have a link to his book: Frank: A Life in Politics from the Great Society to Same-Sex Marriage. That's at our Web site, Policy360.org. Barney Frank's visit to Duke is supported by the Samuel and Ronnie Heyman Center for Ethics, Public Policy and the Professions in collaboration with the Kenan Institute for Ethics; POLIS, the Center for Political leadership, Innovation and Service; and the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.