

Will Marshall, Founder, Progressive Policy Institute (PPI)

April 8, 2011, Interviewed by ERJ (no tape)

Will started PPI in 1989. People were paying attention to our critique: what should we be doing in the alternative? What new ideas were there to shed ideological baggage?

Mission was to develop new ideas. We were looking for innovations that might have significance. Looked at open enrollment. Focused on kids going outside the district.

Got into conversation with David Osborne. He had been talking to Ted Kolderie. Osborne was writing his book Laboratories for Innovation (check title). He looked at governors doing innovative things...he came across public school choice in MN and Ted Kolderie. Osborne's book also highlighted Clinton as an innovative governor in the country.

Ted and Will talked...something very fascinating here...Ted was thinking about how to go beyond district choice model to allow you to create schools anywhere ...create choices for public schools anywhere...withdrawing the exclusive...we went around editorial mulberry bush many times to make sure audience could understand it...his idea was: what if we withdrew the exclusive franchise in owning all public schools in their area?
Speculative exercise on Ted's part. Charters appears in the 1990 document of PPI.

Ted was way ahead of its time...we worked to shape the concept. Allowing entrepreneurial people and teachers to come in and create innovative public schools. Will played an editorial role, helped crystallize it some. Interplay between both.

Chartering was either #2 or #3 policy proposal out of PPI. First was on earned income tax credit expansion. Individual Development accounts was another. All three were translated by Bill Clinton into law.
I kept pushing. What does it mean? Ted's vision was that the schools come to the kids, rather than the kids go to the schools.

Ted was a very interesting thinker...came at things in an oblique way for me...I asked logical and deductive questions...

In the end this was Ted's idea. Core of it was withdrawing exclusive franchise from school districts. I got religion...and went around proselytizing this. Emblematic of Third Way; of what PPI would offer to Democrats. Vouchers were in the air. So was privatizing public schools. Charter schools were equated with vouchers. You can't do that. Ted called it opening up R and D sector in public education. Ted never made the mistake of early reformers...did not overstate what charters could do. The simple act of chartering doesn't mean creating something great. (It was opportunity to create something great.)

I would talk with Democratic audiences...I remember a DLC meeting in Anchorage Alaska, getting flame throwers, people in your face screaming at me. Rank and file Dems had intense reflexive opposition...conflation of vouchers and charters. I was shaping a progressive alternative to vouchers.

We were working on DLC members to get them to embrace it. Bill Clinton was chairman...he was going around the country with Al From and building support for his ideas. I was mostly in DC looking for innovations and developing policy proposals and feeding that into DLC. Clinton would pick them up at DLC meetings, annual meetings, etc.

Gov. Clinton had been a real education reformer. He lost his reelection for governor when he crossed purposes with the teachers union re: merit pay. He was a little sensitive about that. He had been called a reformer in Laboratories of Innovation...we told him we either reform the public school system, or conservatives would get the upper hand. So he understood that.

Q: Story about Clinton blowing up? Will: I was talking on the phone with him, somewhere on the road...he had been getting push back and blow back and wanted to know why we were so keen on chartering....I explained why it was a potential alternative between the "More Money Dem" crowd and conservatives, who saw public education as a hopeless bureaucracy to bypass with vouchers. Vigorous conversation...got a little heated...I was arguing Third Way...he accused me of being willing to poke a stick in the eye of liberal interests...I said we needed to champion reform, not just funding...he thought this was unduly provocative of groups by which he had good relationship and wanted to keep...but then he warmed to it and weaved it into his repertoire.

Q: Describe more Clinton's discomfort with Chartering. Will: He and Al were on road honing and refining new Dem message...before Cleveland...he was getting a lot of criticism that the DLC was divisive, combative, causing disharmony and disunity in the party. Clinton was bound up in that. Teachers were expressing anxiety...but he found a way to wrap his mind around it and be comfortable with it. Had to make tactical decision about how much to say. He knew ideas were powerful, (ie) national service, were powerful...a core logic ordinary people found attractive.

Got to know Ember around that time, 1991... Ted was keeping me abreast ...Minnesota was the first state to pass charter schools and that definitely that made it real. It was a real world proposal...happening on the ground in America. So much of what PPI did was to support innovators on the ground like you....

Got around and talked to a bunch of members and put a face on this idea (chartering)...an attractive progressive face, that was helpful to the cause to elevate the profile of the issue. It was an idea that didn't have an immediate national policy relevance. But it was emblematic of a new dem governing philosophy...

Our job was to modernize progressive politics. It was important to rejuvenate and innovate...that's what you were doing...

I need to say how important it was that a dem president and education secretary were leading the charge...because people were still saying this was republican, an assault on public schools. I talked with dems in my home state of Virginia, they were not convinced...they saw them as segregation academies...it was so important that it started in MN with upper Midwest progressives...could not have started in south with difficult racial history...the fact it started in good progressive state...incredibly important...and then goes to California (another progressive state). I hit a brick wall in Virginia....

I talked with Jon (Schroeder) in those days. It was important to us to nationalize.

David Osborne was a fellow traveler on this...his book Reinventing Government was important part of this effort to popularize what people like you were doing...

1992 Mandate for Change, I wrote a section on chartering (with Ted), for agenda of Clinton administration. Ted Kolderie: was one of the visionaries of the Chartered school movement...understood need to bring innovative schools to where kids live rather than have kids search for them...Ted remains a visionary today...a radical re-imaging of school. Remains one of foremost educational visionaries in country. Never lost his head about charters...he never lost his perspective...that charters were means to a larger end...reinvention of public schools in American...not the invention themselves.....

Stuart Butler of Heritage Foundation, in 1990 wrote Beyond Left and Right...(then it was just Left and Right)...there was an intellectual convergence on left and right looking for new ideas...public school choice was on our agenda...both groups interested from different angles...the idea that there was room for innovation in public education...so we talked with each other about it...they were critical of first George Bush where "idea" was a four-letter word...they became partners on the right trying to popularize these ideas...

Ideas today just get stamped within an agenda...charter schools didn't fit neatly within categories.....ie "this isn't conservative...let me explain why it isn't..." Will: Do not let this become a conservative idea. If you abandon it, then Republican governors will run with it...

PPI and DLC went separate ways two years ago...Bruce inherited DLC... PPI has Progressive Fix.com... Gates, Jim Blue Walton foundations fund

Suggests give book proposal, give to a 501c3 foundation...possibilities: Walton, Eli Broad, Gates (Stephanie Sanford), Humphrey Institute.

Clinton Keynote Address: National DLC Convention in Cleveland (around 16 minutes into video):

"We should be for more choices...choice is not a code word for elitism or racism. We are living in a world when all of us want choices...like 60 channels on cable television, etc.

"With appropriate protections against discrimination based on race or income, we can provide our people more choices: child care vouchers, public school choice options, job training programs, choices for elderly--who used to be required when frail, in order to get more money to go to nursing homes—to let them have more choices to stay independent and stay at home." (applause).