



Policy on Purpose

Episode 4: Texas State Sen. Kirk Watson (D)

ANGELA EVANS: Welcome to “Policy on Purpose.” I’m your host, Angela Evans, and I serve as dean of the Lyndon Baines Johnson School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. Today, we’re talking about all things policy and public service with a very special guest who just finished speaking to our LBJ community, as part of our Dean’s Distinguished Leaders Series. I’m very happy to welcome Texas Sen. Kirk Watson.

SEN. KIRK WATSON: I’m happy to be here.

EVANS: Thank you.

WATSON: I appreciate it. It was fun to talk to the students, and it’s fun to be here part of this.

EVANS: Well, it was wonderful. And you were just very inspiring with your ideas, and your ability to talk to them about your career, and how you integrate your career with what they’re learning now, is really great. So, a little background on the senator: He was elected to the Texas Senate in 2006 to represent District 14, which includes Bastrop County and parts of Travis County, including Austin, but the senator’s political history in Texas goes back much farther. From 1997 to 2001, he served as mayor of Austin, and is well-known for his ability to build consensus around environmental conservation and transportation improvements, among many other things. The overall quality of Austin and Texas’s air, water, roads, health and educational services, and the character of a skylines are rooted in many of Sen. Watson’s efforts as mayor and now a senator, although he would never admit that. So, senator, I’m going to start with my first question. You began your public career at an early age, and have persisted in your commitment to public service. What is it about public service that has inspired you to take the step, to move from practicing law to run for office? And what has fueled this passion to continue?

WATSON: Well, I’ve always had the itch to be involved in service in some way. And I think part of it is the house I grew up in. My mother was a registered nurse, and I kind of grew up in the hospital that she worked in. She worked in a children’s hospital, and I can remember — I can give you specific stories about watching families and parents of sick kids, she worked on the surgical floor. She was not a surgical nurse, but she worked on that floor, when the children

would come in. The impact she had on people's lives was because she was serving them by helping take care of their children. That sometimes when they were clearly not at their best, right? They had a sick child and they were very worried. So that was a big part.

My father was a lifelong public servant. He was kind of a late bloomer, and he woke up one day after having been married and had two kids, said, I've got to do something else. So he went to night school, and got his college degree at night school. And from there, he was a federal employee, and he considered what he did, the work that he did to be the highest calling because he was serving the public. He also was on a school board in the school district that I grew up in, and he was president of that school board. So he had some elected public service, but mostly, it was just that he wanted to touch people through his day to day job. So, I think always had the itch, in part, because I grew up in a house of service. So I was involved. I did things. I was on board into those kinds of things. But what prompted me to finally say, I'm going to do this, is I got sick.

EVANS: Really?

WATSON: Yes. I'm a cancer survivor. As I tease, I'm supposed to be dead a couple of times over. And what happened was, when my cancer, when I had a recurrence, and a big surgery after, they found another tumor in my abdomen, and they went in and removed lymph nodes and did all that. I decided at that point I was going to do something different. And I didn't know what that looked like, but I gave myself about 18 months to figure it out. Then I thought, the mayor's office is open, maybe I'll run for mayor of Austin. And I've always liked public policy. I've always liked service. I've always thought maybe I wouldn't run, but I'll tell you one of the gifts of cancer, was that it gave me the freedom to say "OK, I'm really going to do something different." The other gift was, by the way, running for mayor of Austin made me the only person in America that thought being mayor of Austin was better than chemotherapy. But, one of the other gifts was, if I didn't like it, it wasn't cancer. And I would try it, and see what happened. And the truth of the matter is, I fell in love with it. And so, it's been a real pleasure of mine that the voters keep blessing me by giving me an opportunity to serve.

EVANS: Well, they bless you because you do a good job as well. But were you thinking about being rooted in that, when you are in a family that is involved in that? And I also read something that you had gone to Washington on a trip, and that you saw the monuments, and those two moved you into thinking about government as well. *[overlapping]*

WATSON: And I'm assuming you've read that, so, when daddy finished his undergraduate degree, he had been working for the Federal Aviation Administration as an electrical technician, based upon education he got while in the Air Force. But it was only after he got his degree and he was now an electrical engineer, that he was working — he stayed at the FAA and worked as an electrical engineer, and they moved him to the regional headquarters. And after about a year there, they said, "You know, let's get you some additional education," because he was a pretty smart guy. So, they sent him up to Syracuse — *[overlapping]* Syracuse to the Maxwell

School to work, on a certificate. It was not a full degree, but it was a certificate, and then they rotated him through the national headquarters of the Federal Aviation. And that's when I was in the fourth grade, So, that was '68. So, all that was going on in 1968, including having a Texan in the White House.

EVANS: Right.

WATSON: And my parents, they were from Oklahoma and Texas, and they took full advantage. There was not a weekend that we weren't at some monument or in some museum, it's as though they never would go back to Washington, DC, again. But there's no question that had an impact on me.

EVANS: Well, that's really great, because we talk a lot about you are the sum total of all of your experiences, So, when we had these experiences when you're young, when your family is interested in this type of thing, it all comes to a point where you make this decision. So, thank you for that.

WATSON: Sure.

EVANS: OK, here's another question for you.

WATSON: Sure.

EVANS: And during your career, you have worked on so, many issues, with both Democrats and Republicans across a broad array of the political spectrum. For instance, in just this past legislative session, you introduced two bills taking aim at sexual assault on campuses of higher education. And they had broad.

WATSON: Yes.

EVANS: Bipartisan support. Can you talk a bit about your approach to formulating policy in the face of ideological differences and at times, you know, true-blue opposition. What tactics have you found to be the most effective?

WATSON: Well, I would say the first tactic, if you will, or the first thing, is you have to listen carefully, to hear what people might have as issues. And sometimes, they'll articulate one problem, but they're really saying a different one because of whatever the politics of the time are, right, or the politics of the issue. So, it's not uncommon for me to spend a lot of time listening to members, but also to different advocacy groups, and groups that may be initially opposed to your legislation. I follow a rule, that I'm not going to get my concept of perfection very often on something. So, what I look to do is, I don't demand my concept of perfection on something, because I may be able to get a big change in policy, but not get everything I want. One of the bills was very important to me. It would require that private universities also have a sexual assault policy. Public universities had that requirement, but private universities didn't. As

part of the initial bill on that, it also required that as part of that sexual assault policy, there would be a requirement of affirmative consent, so the schools would institute that as a policy. That didn't make it. But I wasn't going to kill the bill because that didn't make it. There was progress to be made — including, by the way, the progress of requiring that there'll be a mechanism for online reporting, and anonymity in certain instances. So, we made real progress, but we didn't get everything I wanted.

And then the other thing I would say is, there has to be some effort to be relentless on some of this, right? You may not win the first time, and there may be other ways to skin the cat. And so, you look for other vehicles. Another area that I feel pretty strongly about is public information. I had a couple of bills that I passed out of the Senate, stand-alone bills that would have created greater — well actually, what they would have done is, they would have fixed a Texas Supreme Court case that, I think, two cases that blew holes in our open government laws, our public information laws. This would have fixed that. Well, I passed them as stand-alone bills, they're over [to] the House, and they're dying in the House. So a House bill comes over, and I work to get those bills as amendments on this different House bill, so that I can send it back to the House in hopes that it will now pass even as amendments. To do that, I had to at one point get the chair of one of the committees to help suspend the rules so we could have a hearing quickly on one of those amendments. The point being that you have to be relentless and look for other opportunities, and always working with folks to try to figure out if they can help you — maybe seek those other opportunities.

EVANS: I find when I was in Washington, DC, and working for the United States Congress, it was the members who were proactive in going out to people and saying, "Look, this is what I'm going to be doing. Can you support me?" And they got the ideas quickly as to what were some of the problems people would have with what you were saying, and then they were able to actually build that into some of their thinking. And this is something that I'm hearing you say.

WATSON: Yes. The way I would say it a little differently is: be biased toward action. Be biased toward action and not fear that you might fail. But there's another part to that, and that is, don't do something you know is never going to happen — all it's going to do is create problems, and maybe will create problems for people you're going to need on something else. You don't need to create those problems. And I try, probably don't always succeed, in being as good at this as I would like to be, or as good a person as I'd like to be. But I try to develop relationships where people don't think what my goal is, is to create an unnecessary enemy, or put them in a box. Instead, [this] is a way for us to work on this.

And I learn, as I tell you, from the great lessons my first session in the Senate. I had a bill that meant the world to me. It ultimately did not become law. But Sen. Florence Shapiro from Plano was killing my bill. She even got my best friends on the floor to vote no on that. And I one day went to her and said, "Senator, can we walk through my bill, and you tell me what it is you hate so much about my bill?" And we spent several hours on two separate days going through that bill, and I made so many changes in that bill and some of them were great improvements. And Sen. Shapiro, she stood up on the floor — and normally this doesn't happen, but when I moved

to suspend the rules to bring that bill up, a lot of people were looking to her. And she stood up, and she talked about how I had worked with her on that bill. Now, she worked with me is what really happened. She's a dear friend of mine now and we became very close.

But, it was because she was willing to help. I was willing to listen. And we made good changes. We passed out of the Senate, but it died in the House.

EVANS: Well, again, that's another example — I think one of the things that we worry about a lot — is that students or our people are getting into an echo chamber. They talk to people that agree with them, and they don't know how to talk to people who may disagree with them, or how to make a foray after those folks.

WATSON: It's two things about that. One is, you got to be willing to talk to people that might disagree with you. And number two is, you can't be afraid that they may know something you don't know *[overlapping]*.

EVANS: This is all about public policy, right? It's all about making things right. So it's not about —

WATSON: They probably do know something you don't know. You need to learn it.

EVANS: Exactly. *[laughter]* I know that health care is a major priority for you. And you just talked about [the fact] that you're a cancer survivor. You were instrumental in the creation of the medical school [at] UT Austin, and have been a passionate advocate for mental health as well. So it's just not the physical part of our health system. Five years ago, you set out with an ambitious list of 10 goals you wanted to accomplish in 10 years. Can you talk about why health issues are so important to you?

WATSON: Well, we've kind of talked about it.

EVANS: Yeah.

WATSON: I mean, look. I'm sitting here doing this podcast because of early, effective and frequent health care. There's no question — I had a disease that kills folks. But because of early, effective and frequent health care, I live in a pretty blessed life. When I walk on that Senate floor and I think, this is pretty special. I've got a grandbaby coming in November — my first grandchild. And I'm going to see that grandchild. Both of my parents died of cancer. My dad when he was 66, and then 13 months later, my mother when she was 62. When she was first diagnosed, she was 41 years old. We thought she had we had very little time with her. And her rule of life became, "Give me six months. Because who knows what they'll invent it'll keep me alive — another six months, and who knows what I'll see?" And she lived, by the way, from 41 to 62. So she got to see a lot of good things happen. Died way too early, but still saw a lot of good. But my point being, I think there's almost an obligation for me to make sure that others have opportunity like I had because I had access to health care. I'm very pleased [that the] 10

goals in 10 years that you that you referenced has resulted in so much good happening and going to make such a difference for the health care of Travis County, and for people that can't afford health care.

EVANS: Why don't you tell our listeners about some of the things.

WATSON: Well, the 10 goals in 10 years — one of them was [bringing] a medical school to The University of Texas at Austin. Another one was a modern 21st-century teaching hospital. The third was uniquely Austin health clinics in neighborhoods, where people can get access to health care. One was better behavioral health care in this community. And obviously, that's four — I mean, there are six others and we can go through them, but we have a medical school now — a medical school that has one of the few population health departments in the country. That's going to make a difference regardless of people's ability to pay. And now they're just opening their clinical services. It's going to help the folks that have don't have the kind of access I had to early effective and frequent health care. It's going to help there.

We have a modern 21st-century safety net and teaching hospital that was built and paid for by the Seton Healthcare Family at no cost to taxpayers. That's all part and parcel of this. And we've also got that the Southeast Community Health and Wellness Clinic, and things of that nature. And then, if I have my way — and I'm making real progress — we will turn the site of the Austin State Hospital into a behavioral health center that when people think of getting health care — mental health care at that site. The way they will think about it, I predict, will be the way people think about getting cancer care at MD Anderson, or cardiac care at the Cleveland Clinic.

We have a real opportunity that we didn't have five years ago. First of all, the Austin state hospital is unsalvageable. It has to be rebuilt. And we were able to get \$300 million into the state budget this last session that will go to a variety of places, but I anticipate that shortly, we'll be announcing that several million dollars will be go into the planning process for that. I've already put together the group. It's being led by Dr. Steve Strakowski. And here's another part of the opportunity that we didn't have: He's the chair of the department of psychiatry at Dell Medical School at The University of Texas at Austin. And we're going to have the whole continuum of care — we worked that out. We've got partners that are looking at including the Meadows Mental Health Research Foundation.

So, yeah — you can tell I'm getting worked up just talking about them. I'm getting passionate about it right now. The opportunities are there. And I just feel a special obligation because I'm not dead, and I'm in a position to make a difference on that.

EVANS: Well, we were talking earlier in the series that we hear with the students and hearing you speak as well. Some of the ideas you hear you've been able to execute. And they really made the community richer, healthier, etc. And when you're doing it, you're talking not only about your passion, but one of the things I'm interested in just learning from you — how do you use information and research? How easy is it for you to get what you need, and how do you use

it when you're making these when you're trying to set your goals, and trying to set benchmarks for what you're trying to achieve?

WATSON: I don't know how you would do it without having good information, right? So I start with the idea that we may have a concept, we may have a passion, but we need to dig down and have the kind of research and data necessary to be able make decisions that will actually be practical. My approach to things is I typically start off with the question, "Why are we doing it?" I call that the passion. Why are we passionate about it? Why we worked up about this? Why do we want to do this? And I try to force myself, and others that I'm working with, to really zero in on what's the real issue here. Data many times makes a difference on that as well. I mean, somebody may think it's the reason that we've got this issue or this problem is X, but when you really dig down into it — yeah, X is part of it? But there may be a Y and Z. And so you have to have some data to help you with that. And my next step is then the possibilities. Well, having good research about what are the possibilities for how you can address that issue. Well, I mean, we can all sit around have a beer and come up with five or six that they may have no relationship to, and we may miss something.

EVANS: Right.

WATSON: Then the next step is, how do you make it practical? Well, of course, you have to have good information to deal with that as well. So, it's in the way I approach problem-solving — the way our approach tries to bring about change, or bring about positive results. You have to have good research, data and information that every step of the way.

EVANS: Well, this is music to my ears, because when you're in a public policy school, that's exactly what we're trying to do. What is the problem? How do you know it's a problem? And how do you judge data as being valid or not valid? And then the other part is how you have creative options — but in those options, how do you help inform a policymaker about what are the advantages and disadvantages of those options? I think part of the things we're worried about now is that some lawmakers do not appreciate information, or people think about false information and the plethora of information. So one of the ideas that we have here is how do we make sure that we, when we're growing our students, they're coming out of the school and they really understand the importance of good information, good data, good research but also how to be creative with it in an arena that's political.

WATSON: Yeah, exactly. I mean, one of the biggest threats in my view in this — and I don't think I'm overstating this. A real threat to our democracy and the way we go about bringing about policy and implementing policy is that we dismiss information if it doesn't correspond with our ideological view. And that's happening way too much. And more and more, I think if it doesn't make me feel good because it doesn't correspond with what I feel so passionately, as an ideological or political point of view, then it gets dismissed.

EVANS: Yes.

WATSON: And we're doing that way too much.

EVANS: Yes. And this is something we're really trying to work on at the school. So...

WATSON: Right.

EVANS: Senator, you received an award earlier this month naming you an "Open Government Lawmaker of the Year."

WATSON: Yeah.

EVANS: Government transparency and freedom of information are major priorities for you and have been for your career. What challenges do you see as a lawmaker in creating more transparency in government operations? And do you see any downsides to the open government initiatives?

WATSON: Well I'll start with the challenges. There's couple of challenges. One is with technology; we might be able to do things that are more efficient. So for example, a couple sessions ago, I worked with then-Attorney General Greg Abbott, who's now Gov. Greg Abbott. And we worked on a bipartisan piece of legislation that would create the ability for governmental bodies like city councils and county commissioners courts to meet through a message board, even when they weren't having the physical meeting together, so that they could build some efficiencies into the government because you want to avoid having a quorum and discussions behind closed doors. But they can use a message board that is completely accessible to the public. I mean, we put requirements into that, so that they could communicate with each other through the message board — for example, the city council using such a message board. So, one of the challenges is trying to keep up with technology. The flip side of that coin is: How do you make sure that people aren't communicating through technology in a way that avoids open government? And I think we have some real-world challenges in that regard.

The other is that there's a lot of privatization going on with government services. And regardless of how one feels about that, it's occurring in a lot of private entities that want those tax dollars. They want to make those tax dollars. They want to have those tax dollars, but they don't want to talk about how they do their business. Well, that is a real problem. And the Supreme Court, the Texas Supreme Court, I mentioned a little bit earlier, created more opportunity for them to be able to hide their contracts with government. I just don't think that ought to be the case. There's a really good general rule: If you don't want to tell the public how you're spending their tax dollars, then don't take the public tax dollars. It's just that simple. And I think that's going to be a real challenge. And I worry about the fact that we have that hole. And we passed good legislation out of the Senate, but we could not get it out of a committee in the House. And then, with regard to the latter part of your question, which is, there are instances where it might be in the government's best interest. Well, let me rephrase that — in the taxpayer's best interest, if certain things, a negotiation that's ongoing, where you're trying

to gain a benefit for the taxpayer. I never play poker by showing you the cards are in my hand. So when I'm negotiating with somebody, I've got to be very careful. If I'm negotiating with somebody to try to get a benefit, that by being if you disclose it too early, you might make it where you create a competitive disadvantage for the taxpayers. But those are specific instances, and as the general rule the more public information the better.

EVANS: Well, we can go on —

WATSON: Yeah.

EVANS: — for a very long time, so I'm going have to have you back. So I really appreciate you being here. And I know everyone's going to appreciate hearing which you have to say — thank you so much.

WATSON: Well, thanks for having me. This has been fun.

EVANS: Good.

WATSON: Take care.