At the conclusion of the November 17th forum on Dan Evans’ leadership on environmental issues, I approached Joan Thomas, former president of the Washington Environmental Council, with an observation. I told her that I had noticed a high proportion of women on the panels that had been assembled for us this quarter. I wondered aloud if this was reflective of the inclusiveness of Dan Evans’ administration.

She chuckled and indicated that it was most certainly not a fluke; that Evans had intentionally sought out the people who were volunteering for causes like the environment in the early 1970s, many of whom were women. She went on to say that this led to the appointments of a great number of women to leadership positions within the Evans administration; not a common occurrence in the early seventies.

Many have also remarked that they were thankful for the way in which Evans “spent his political capital” while in office; that Dan Evans was never afraid to take a principled stand for what he believed in, even if it was politically unpopular.

These are not radical concepts. Democracy is supposed to be participatory by design and leaders are supposed to actually have the courage to lead. Yet I have found myself surprised by the passion with which these concepts have been communicated to us this quarter. I keep asking myself, why don’t politicians today inspire me like Dan Evans does?
In 1965 Evans stated the following in the conclusion of his Inaugural Address:

For the success of the next two years will not be measured by how well we opposed one another but how successfully we united to promote the common welfare of the people. It will not be measured by the length of our debates, but by the results they obtain. Nor will it be measured by how well we have served our parties; only by how well our parties have served the people.

This particular articulation of promoting the “common welfare of the people”, above partisan rancor, almost seems lofty today. For example, I recently opened the newspaper to learn that Arnold Schwarzenegger, Republican Governor of California, has apparently alienated his “conservative base” by appointing a chief of staff who is a Democrat. It seems that today there are fewer and fewer politicians on either the local or national level that are willing to extend the bipartisan branch of compromise to fellow politicians in order to produce a more robust outcome for society as a whole.

For any of us considering a life in politics or public administration, Dan Evans serves as a model for a practice of politics that first remains true to the people, and second to the political party. It strikes me that the aforementioned qualities – valuing diversity and taking principled stands on policy, are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are concepts that overlap to inform one-another. They are concepts that allowed Evans to “spend
political capital” in a powerful manner during his time as Governor of the State of Washington.

During the Alternatives for Washington campaign, for example, panelists talked extensively of the intentional efforts made to involve a variety of constituents. We have rarely seen this kind of comprehensive planning process replicated, even in the public-process-heavy Pacific Northwest. Instead, we have now supplanted real participatory processes like Alternatives for Washington with meetings that masquerade as participatory.

As a leader Dan Evans had the courage to ask people what they wanted, which inevitably involved being willing to hear what people were angry about or why they disagreed with him. This was demonstrated in the story he told about traveling to Skamania County as a US Senator to discuss the politics of renewing a dam license. This particular public meeting was rancorous and lasted from 9:00 am to Midnight.

I believe that true participatory democracy not only allows for dissent, but actively creates venues for its articulation. Dan Evans was an inspirational leader not only because he valued a diversity of opinion, but because he took consistent steps to seek it out, and then allowed it to inform his public policy platform. So even if you disagreed with him, as many did, you were constantly aware that his opinions were not formed in a vacuum.
This is why I believe Dan Evans is remarkably different from some of the contemporary politicians who are also quite adept at “spending political capital”; President George W. Bush, King County Executive Ron Sims, and Mayor Greg Nickels, to name a few. Each of these leaders has been elected to office more than once, earning a strong mandate from the people. Yet each of them, to some extent, is seriously challenged by the concept of “dissent.” We witness this in the President’s inability to balance his foreign policy with non-hawkish perspectives, King County Ron Sims inability to reach out to rural voters during the adoption of a new Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO) and, to some extent, Mayor Nickels dogged inability to gain community buy-in regarding the proposed transformation of South Lake Union.

While I agree with the new King County CAO, I now live in fear of a rural backlash that will hijack growth management through the initiative process and take us back twenty years in time. What if, as Evans had suggested during the forum on the environment, Sims had worked to gain buy-in from these constituents, or at least consulted them on their own turf? Would it be better to have a 200 foot wetlands buffer that everyone can agree on rather than a 300 foot buffer that will ultimately undermine the political strength of the Growth Management Act because of the ensuing urban/rural division it has exacerbated?

It is division along these boundaries – rural/urban, red/blue, white/black, rich/poor – that has come to characterize our politics today.
Dan Evans speaks of a time when leaders had the courage to possess ideas about how to improve the lives of people through policy, without picking a side to isolate oneself from difference of opinion. Whether Democrat or Republican, we should all take a lesson from this kind of bold and principled leadership.