This is Morton Tenzer. It is March 20, 1997. I am in the Law Library in the offices of the former Speaker, Ernest Abate. We are going to conduct an interview on Creating Connecticut’s Modern General Assembly and his role and participation and observations of events that occurred while he was in the Legislature.

TENZER: We will begin the interview by asking Speaker Abate if he can tell us something about his early life, his family, his education, where and when you were born.

ABATE: I was born in New Haven in 1943. My family lived in a house on Chatham Street in the Fair Haven area of New Haven. It was a two family house: my grandparents lived on the second floor, my parents, brother, and I on the first floor. I went through local schools, St. Francis grammar school there in Fair Haven and then Notre Dame High School in West Haven. After high school, I went to Villanova University and then to the Notre Dame Law School. Right out of Law School, I went into the Marine Corps, and then into the Legislature.

MT: Can you tell me how you got involved in politics. You presumably left the Marine Corp. You had a law degree before you went into the Marine Corp.

EA: Yes.

MT: You left the Marine Corp and moved to Stamford.

EA: That’s exactly right. When I was in the Marine Corp in California, I was invited to visit a couple of law firms in Connecticut. I came back and was interviewing with larger law firms, and in the
interview process, I decided that I didn’t want to practice in a large firm. I could tell that the kinds of things they were going to ask me to do were things I thought, in effect, were beneath me because of the experiences, the maturity I had developed during my years in the service. I thought I would go to a small firm where maybe I’d have more responsibility. During one of the interviews, I asked a partner if he were aware of any good small firms. He gave me the name of a partner in a small firm that had really just formed, and they happened to have an office in Stamford. I interviewed with them and decided that I liked them, and so I joined them. That is how I ended up coming to Stamford. I always had an interest in politics. I was a political science major and was just fascinated with politics even as a young kid.

MT: They had some good people in the Villanova Political Science Department.

EA: Yes.

MT: Ed Logue’s brother.

EA: That’s exactly right. He was a professor of mine. My interest in politics had been formed a long time ago. I don’t know why. It was my personality, my character. I just happened to like government and
politics. I liked reading about politicians. I remember being fascinated with a book. It might have been, "Who Governs."

MT: By Robert Dahl.

EA: Robert Dahl told a story of New Haven politics and, being from New Haven, I was fascinated by the book. I remember really enjoying that stuff. And then we were all fascinated by the Kennedy years. You know, young people in government doing what we all thought were good things. So, I always had an interest in politics and always thought that maybe I would want to be an office holder someday. Although, I never imagined that would really happen. No one in my family was ever involved in politics. There was nothing in my family that might be the reason that I developed an interest. I always thought maybe it would be nice, but I really didn't see it happening.

Well, I came to Stamford and was involved in this law practice. I always had an interest in getting into community activities, community affairs, so I was on a couple of social service agency boards. These boards always like to have lawyers on the boards to give them advice and help them along. I went from one board to another and, started to meet other people involved in community matters who were
also in politics. Before I knew it, the party organization at the time came to me and said, well, you happen to live in a district where we need a candidate to run for the Legislature. Not for the local Board of Representatives which is our local city council, but here I was already being approached to run for a seat in the One Hundred and Forty Eighth Assembly District. And I had only been in Stamford a couple of years. I actually got out of the service in '72 and here I was running for office. The election was November '74. In a short time, things happened that quickly. I didn't seek that out. It isn't like I knew these people and went up to them and said, "Listen, I want to run for this seat." They just needed somebody, and there was nobody else they thought would be a good candidate. There was no incumbent in the seat so they came to me, and I said sure. It was a great opportunity. I ran, and that was the year that Ella Grasso was running for Governor for the first time. She won handily and brought in a lot of newly elected Democrats.

MT: Of course, it was in the wake of the Watergate. That was 1974. That was the year.

EA: Exactly.
MT: It was a huge Democratic landslide all over the country.
EA: All over the country. No difference in Connecticut. In fact, that year, out of 151 members of the House of Representatives, 118 were Democrats, only 33 were Republicans. It was that kind of a landslide.

MT: It never happened again.

EA: It never did. That's what I came in on. That was the start of it.

MT: You also had, in a way, a meteoric career in the Legislature. An amazingly rapid promotion, so to speak, and election to the Legislature, having lived in this city for only a couple of years and in many towns it would be hard to get, you weren't a long time resident and what not.

EA: Yes. That was not typical.

MT: Well, I guess I should ask. Were you familiar at all with the General Assembly? Had you ever been in the State Capital before you were elected?

EA: No. I had no familiarity with the history of the General Assembly. I really didn't know anything about its workings. I had never been to the Capital Building before. The first time I was there was for the organizing caucus to select the leadership. It was the first time I walked in, and I remember being so proud of myself. Sitting in the hall of the House of Representatives, looking around.
MT: You were 31 years old.

EA: Yes. Looking around and thinking, this is something else. It was hard for me to believe that I could be there when just a couple of years ago I was in the service and now I was to be part of the process. That, by the way, was an interesting caucus.

MT: Well, tell us.

EA: There were a lot of new people elected that year. So, Jim Kennelly, who had been in the Legislature many years at that point, and Bill O'Neill, who also had been in the Legislature for many years, both point, both wanted to be Speaker of the House. They traveled all over the state during the course of the campaign process, making contact with people they assumed would end up being elected. Then immediately after the election, they visited just about everyone. The two of them at different times, looking for support for Speaker.

MT: They both had been assistant majority leaders in the previous legislature.

EA: That's right. They were ready to move on to the highest post - the office of Speaker. I, like all the Legislators throughout the state, or all the newly elected Representatives, met with these people and then were at this caucus. We had to vote for
one or the other of them. Amazingly, the first ballot was a tie vote, so we went to a second ballot, secret ballot. A tie again. Jimmy Kennelly’s father-in-law was John Bailey. There is a whole history you could discuss about Jim and Bill O’Neill in terms of what they went on to do or what they had done. But Jimmy Kennelly was John Bailey’s son-in-law, married to Barbara Bailey Kennelly and just before the third vote. At that time, John Bailey was not well, he was very sick. In fact, there was some talk that he was brought out of his hospital bed to come into the hall of the House, and he moved around, you know. It was like, John Bailey is going to give the word, and sure enough, we went into that, you saw John sort of huddled with people here and there. We went into the third ballot, and sure enough, his son-in-law won. So some votes switched. That was the beginning of it for me. It was an exciting way to start.

MT: Yes, it was exciting, and you were there, in effect, for the last gasp of the old machine that had run Democratic politics in the Legislature for decades.

EA: That was right, exactly right, that was John Bailey. That was probably the last thing he did of any significance. I think he died shortly after that.
But that last thing he did was a vestige of what he used to do all the time. Just make things happen. So that was the beginning of it, and I quickly thrust myself into the Judiciary Committee. As a lawyer, the Judiciary Committee was very interesting to me, and I wanted to be on it and that was my primary committee assignment. I liked that committee. I found it very interesting. I loved debating. Something I didn't realize that I would love. I was never a member of a debating club or anything like that, but I got into the Legislature and enjoyed those verbal contests on the floor of the House. After my first two years, I really would have loved to become the Chairman of the Judiciary Committee, but that is a committee, you normally have to be on that committee for four or five terms before you can become the Chairman of that committee. Again, circumstances were right for me. There was a Chairmanship opportunity, and I indicated that I had an interest. I was fortunate. I was selected as the Chairman of that committee.

**MT:** That would have been by Jim Kennelly.

**EA:** That was Jim Kennelly, the Speaker of the House. I finished my first two years, Jim was re-elected Speaker, then he was making the committee
assignments. He appointed me Chairman of the Judiciary Committee after two years. That really gave me an opportunity to engage in debate. That committee is very active. Many bills come out of other committees and find their way through the Judiciary Committee because of concurring jurisdiction. So, what I did was not only bring out my own bills, but I would also jump up if a chairman or a member of another committee was bringing a bill out that I had something to do with. I was always there to help them out if they got in trouble and developed a reputation as someone who would jump up and help people out when they were getting into some difficulty debating. We had very skilled debaters on the other side. A guy by the name of Jerry Stevens who has since died.

MT: From Stratford.

EA: Very capable. And, by the way, one of the 33 Republicans I talked about. He and Alan Nevas, who is now a United States District Court Judge, were Minority Leader and Deputy Minority Leader. They did a wonderful job with small numbers, keeping the Democrats on their toes. They were very effective debaters and forced the Democrats to make their case on every bill that came out. They were more skilled
than a lot of the young new Legislators who were there. So, I used to love to jump in and help people out, and I think that probably helped me when I decided at the end of my two year term as Chairman of the Judiciary Committee that I either wanted to get out of the Legislature or move up. I'd decided that it wasn't worth staying there, even as chairman of the committee again, because of all the other pressures I had. My law practice was developing and I had a young family. With the strain of the Legislature on top of it, unless I moved to a higher level, it wasn't going to be worth it. So I decided that I would run for Speaker. Jimmy Kennelly had been elected twice as Speaker, and he was hoping to be elected a third time. So I didn't know if I would have any support at all. As the Legislative session was starting to wind down, maybe a couple of months before the end of the session, the word started getting out that there might be a contest. That Abate might be running against Kennelly. I found that Legislators were coming to me and encouraging me to do this. I began to think that this could really happen and put together a nucleus of support of five or six Legislators. They each took on themselves the responsibility of developing
five or six supporters for me. That little nucleus grew during the campaign. All of us were running for re-election ourselves, but at that point, we were somewhat comfortable with our re-election prospects.

MT: That was 1978.

EA: Yeah. That's right. The election of 1978, we were all running, but somewhat comfortable with our re-election efforts, so we didn't have to spend as much time on our campaigns as we might otherwise have had to. We were able to go around the state, lining up support for this coup. That's what it was going to be because Jimmy was a very powerful, very influential speaker, dominant. And everybody acknowledged his skills as Speaker. But he, at times, was hard on people. As a result, there was an opportunity. People were looking for a change, primarily because of Jim's interpersonal relationships. Not that they questioned his ability as Speaker. It just came down to the way he dealt with people. Also, it was tradition almost, not documented, but just by practice, that you wouldn't serve more than two terms as Speaker of the House. You'd give other people the opportunity to come in, and Jimmy had already had two terms. He was trying
to break the tradition by running for a third term.

A lot of people felt that it was important not to let that happen. I think they felt that it's important to give those who aspire for those positions some incentive, and if you have a Speaker who is there and is going to be there forever, you lose a lot of good talent. You keep that talent if you've got people who at some point hope to become Speaker. They stay in a little longer perhaps and give you the best they've got. So, there is some merit.

MT: Up until the mid sixties before the Constitution was changed, most of the Speakers just served one term. The Legislature met only once every two years and someone would be Speaker, and the next time somebody else would be Speaker there. If you to look in the Blue Book for Connecticut, you'll see that every two years it was a different game. They were all Republicans. The Republicans always dominated it. So there was really no three term tradition because, I think Bill Ratchford had been a two-term Speaker and then Kennelly followed him.

EA: Or Fran Collins.

MT: Fran Collins in the middle for only one term. Because the Republicans had won one year.
EA: So, there was really a tradition of 2 terms, but it was not talked about.

MT: Yes.

EA: Maybe that was a convenience.

MT: For the kind of reasons you said, that people wanted to keep it open. It had been a position that in effect rotated around.
EA: Right, so that was probably a big factor as well. I felt a little uncomfortable about it, but I was ambitious enough at that point to deal with it. Jim had appointed me Chairman of the Judiciary Committee, although there were others equally qualified to be Chairman of that committee. It was a high profile position that gave me a forum to be able to demonstrate my ability. Without it, I would never have been able to become Speaker.

MT: And it got you acquainted with a lot of members.

EA: A lot of members. And here I was, challenging the guy who had given me the opportunity to even get to that point.

MT: And only a two term member.

EA: Right.

MT: Which was really unusual. And awfully young, you were 34.

EA: Yeah. That was another unusual thing.

MT: Well, tell me a little about the difficulties of being in the Legislature and trying to develop a practice. You presumably were driving to Hartford every day.

EA: Yes. It was very difficult. I was with a small law firm for a couple of years. But about a year after I was elected, I found that I was, by necessity,
having to spend time in Hartford, and I felt uncomfortable. I couldn’t give this firm the kind of time they deserved. They were paying me a salary and expected to have a lawyer there all the time. I couldn’t be there all the time. For a long time, I struggled and really strained. I would leave home about 5 in the morning to go to the office. I remember driving with my headlights on at that time of the morning. I’d get as much dictation done as I could, putting it on tape before I’d run out of there about 8:30. Then I’d get to Hartford and get on the phone and call back to the office to see how things were going. Then I went back to the office at the end of the day. So the strain was really great. Primarily, it was because I felt I owed the members of this firm more than I could give them. I could handle the personal strain; it was manageable.

It was the psychological strain of knowing I wasn’t giving them the time they deserved. So, I left and went on my own as a sole practitioner. I was very apprehensive about it because I had a wife and a child and no regular pay check. That child, in fact, is now my law partner. We didn’t have car phones back then. They might have been available, but you didn’t have nearly the communications. So
they only worked in certain parts of the state. I didn’t have a car phone. I remember jumping on that accelerator, trying to get myself to Hartford quickly so I could check back and find out what needed to be done. It was tough because it was considered a part time legislature. It still is.

MT: The compensation is negligible. It was then. I don’t know if you remember what it was.

EA: My recollection is maybe ten or eleven thousand or something like that.

MT: Are you sure it was that much?

EA: When I first started, it wasn’t, but when I ran for speaker, it was around there, if I recall. Actually, when you mention it, it might have been four or five thousand dollars when I was first elected. We did move that up a little bit.

MT: Yes, that was one of the issues in the reform and modernization. Compensation was so low. I think it was six hundred dollars. That was really a deterrent if you didn’t have money and time. There were a lot of retirees in the Legislature.

EA: Obviously, that is what you’re going to get.

MT: Even now when it’s roughly seventeen thousand a year. In inflationary terms, it isn’t much more than it was back when you were in.
EA: That's true. The reform hasn't gotten to that. There is some argument. In fact, recently, one of our local legislators, a guy who has been in for a long time, wrote an article about the editorial staff of our newspaper pushing for a full time legislature. Paid accordingly. He wrote an article that said no, you would lose some of what you have now with citizen legislators. That's another argument. When I came in, it was the beginning, in effect, of what is called the modern Legislature. The new era. There were a lot of changes, a lot of reforms were contrary to the idea of a part-time citizen Legislature. That's probably why my whole legislative career consisted of just eight years. I just decided, because of the other strains, I couldn't stay with it. I either had to move to a position where it would be worth it or get out. I think a lot of good people left because of that.

MT: I think they will continue to unless the compensation is made somewhat commensurate. It would never be commensurate to what you could make, let's say, as a successful lawyer. Right now you can't live on it. Unless it becomes somewhat liveable, it never will. There is this commission now that recommended salary increases for the
executive branch and the legislature branch. The Governor has rejected the recommendation.

EA: It's almost politically popular to do that now.
MT: Of course. The past Legislature used to have increase its own compensation. That always turned out to be impossible. So, they created a commission on compensation for state service. That would neutralize and get prestigious people to make salary recommendations. So they have. It is still more popular, if not grand standing so to speak, for the governor to reject it. No, I will not take an increase and that means no one else will get an increase. I think the people who suffer the most are actually the judges because it is all linked in. We have difficulty in our state getting successful lawyers to give up their careers and become judges because they are taking such a huge cut in salary. I’ve known some judges who have really complained about it. One can always say it isn’t that bad. But that’s still, one of my last questions was going to be do you think we ought to have a full time professional legislature, such as other states do.

EA: You know I have ambivalent reactions to that. I can certainly see the advantage in what I refer to as citizen legislators. Presumably, these individuals are going to be more responsive to their constituency because they are a part of that constituency.
MT: Of course, the whole term limit movement around the country is a reaction against the long time serving legislatures in state legislatures where there are full time legislators, as well as Congress. Here in Connecticut since we don't have that, we haven't had much of a movement about term limits. In fact, as I mentioned before we started the interview, the turnover has decreased and there are more people who stay in longer. Even the compensation, as low as it is, another unique thing now is that we get a number of twenty-year-olds, not twenty but twenty-five to thirty-year-olds in Legislature because someone right out of college who is ambitious. They may not be able to get a job for seventeen thousand. So we have some people who serve well for a few terms until they got married and have children. Then they give it up. We still have a number of older people who can afford it.

EA: It has worked. I think the product that comes out of the Connecticut Legislature, historically, has been a good one. It is a good legislature. The system has worked pretty well. I suppose that you are more likely to avoid scandals and problems if you have citizen type legislators than if you have people there on a full time basis whose livelihood
becomes dependent on the Legislature. There are more temptations, and they’re more likely, perhaps, to compromise. There is another side to that, of course, that could be argued as well. The point is that there is no compelling argument to go full time. Why not stay with the current system since it seems to work?

MT: Yes, on the other had, one could say, that despite the fact virtually all the legislative leaders through this past twenty five year period have said they were against a full time professional legislature. By increments we got it and about the only thing we don’t really have in it to fully round it out, is the compensation.

EA: That’s right. That notion of a full time legislature started when I was Speaker. I think I was the first Speaker that ended up getting into special sessions. Long term special sessions that were unheard of before. That’s how legislative terms started to become full-time terms. There were several calls for special legislative sessions during Ella’s term. It’s gotten more so as the years have gone on. The legislators seem to be up in Hartford, actively functioning for 8 or 9 months of the 12.
MT: Before we had annual sessions, the legislature met and then everybody went home and that was it for nineteen months, until they met again. Once you had annual sessions, you began to have committee meetings in the interims and it became slowly. More and more as it staffed up you began to have capacities, staff for committees, issues of greater complexity, perhaps. I can certainly recall going to the state capital in '68 or '69 and even in the earlier '70's and it would be totally deserted on a summer day. You go to the new Legislative Office Building even in August, there is going to be all the stuff on the board, unwinding on the tv monitors of things going on. It has become, certainly, in terms of staffing you had virtually no staff back when you began, now you've got a couple of hundred of staff people. There's got to be something for them to do all year round.

EA: They make something happen. That's another story. When I was first elected, you didn't have an office. You didn't even have your own desk. I remember we were shown a room with a big table and some lockers, and that was it. People were basically going to share one large table. As the years went on, I remember I had little cubicles set up for
legislators down in the bowels of the old Capital Building to give them some little work station.
MT: Yes, and they didn’t have telephones. You used to have to stand at a pay phone.

EA: Yes, you didn’t have access to telephones and now look. That Legislative Office Building is incredible. The difference. I remember being envious when I walked into the thing. It was on the drawing board when I was Chairman of the Legislative Management Committee, as Speaker that’s a position you hold, and we began our original discussions about a Legislative Office Building and where we were going to put it. Then when I saw the reality of it, I must admit I was envious of what wonderful trappings they now have in comparison to what we had.

MT: Certainly, the building of that building was the capstone of the whole reform movement because it provided facilities without which the old Legislature was always very handicapped. You didn’t have an office to sit down in. Of course, when you became a leader you did.

EA: Exactly. Everything changed.

MT: The rank and file members had no place to sit down in to even talk to a constituent or anything.

EA: And yet, we did the job. We did a good job under awful work conditions.
MT: Were you aware of these issues of Legislative reform, the need for improvements?

EA: Yeah, there were certain things. When I first was elected Speaker, a number of significant reforms occurred just in terms of the administration of the Legislature. I used to be bothered when I would leave the hall of the House during a Legislative session and walk into that area right outside the hall and anyone who wanted to get you, primarily
lobbyists, people looking to influence legislation, were out there, and you could find no privacy at all. One of the first things I wanted to do was make sure that if a legislator wanted to leave the hall of the House and go outside or, back in those days, grab a cigarette, they would be free of people grabbing them. I remember we precluded
lobbyists from that area and think that’s still in place. I don’t think they allow lobbyists in that one section. We closed the Hawaiian Room, that was during my term. Actually, people had a lot of fun in the old days, going up to the Hawaiian Room. But we closed it. We put a lot of emphasis on program review. That really started coming on as an
important undertaking. Looking at things that had been in place, re-examining them, sunsetting legislation, that was stuff that became popular during those years. It was something we wanted to do because we were a new breed. We didn’t want to do things the old way. We wanted a fresh air, freedom of information. That legislation
was enacted
during my early
years.

MT: This was the post-Watergate years.

EA: That's it. All of these positive changes, all of
which are still in effect today, started right then.

It started in '75 right after the first post-
Watergate election in Connecticut.

MT: You strengthened ethics legislation.

EA: Yes. Right, we did that.

MT: But one thing that still hasn't been addressed
seriously, I think, is campaign finance reform.

EA: It's still a problem. What's on the books now was
done during the post-Watergate era, what campaign
finance laws there are in terms of setting
limitations. We felt that needed to be addressed.

Obviously, there are all kinds of loop holes now
with no limitations existing in terms of
contributions by political action committees to
other political action committees, or candidate
committees.

MT: And the expense of running. I should ask you, do
you recall what it cost you to run when they asked
you in 1974 if you were willing to run?

EA: Yeah. It might have cost a few hundred dollars, if
that. My first election, I can’t imagine that it cost me more than several hundred dollars to get some literature reproduced, printed. Every one volunteered. Nobody was paid to hand stuff out. It was mainly family and friends that did those things.

For my last election, I had already been Speaker for two years and was running for re-election, I had more contributions because of the position I held. I had so much money. I remember sending it back to contributors. That was an important election to me because I was thinking that maybe I would take a shot at running for Governor. So it was a very important election, and I ended up spending more than I would normally have spent. It was still not a lot by comparison to now.

MT: I think they said the average this past election was something like thirty thousand. And Senate seats were about seventy and there were a couple of people who spent over a hundred thousand on Senate elections. One person spent over two hundred thousand to run for a seat in the General Assembly.

EA: A seat that pays fifteen thousand a year. You wonder.

MT: And you wonder what do the people want to give them [laughs].
EA: That’s extraordinary. That underscores the need for some reform.

MT: It raises questions about the real citizen nature of the General Assembly.

EA: That’s right. When you spend that kind of money, yeah.

MT: What kind of citizens are they and who are the beholden to? Well, let’s get back to, I don’t think we finished that dramatic confrontation you had with Mr. Kennelly and how you won.

EA: Well, I remember feeling uncomfortable about it because he had given me the opportunity that then provided me the opportunity to run for Speaker. He was disappointed, Jim was, but he was always very gentlemanly about it. He realized this was an opportunity for me. We never had a confrontation, but it was obviously important to him to be re-elected Speaker. I’m trying to recall what we had.

We had about 84 Democrats elected that year, and as I mentioned, while the re-election campaigns were going on that year, my team of supporters was out generating support for me. When we finally all got ourselves elected, and we knew that we had identified the first-time legislators who were going to support us, we had a good feel for where we were
going to be. We were counting our votes pretty
carefully, but you still never know for sure because
a legislator will tell you, "You've got my vote,"
but it's a secret ballot. So you just never know.
He could be telling the other person the same thing.
I remember being a little uncomfortable going into
it, and I knew this was it. If you're going to
attempt to slay the king, you've got to be
successful. I would never have been re-appointed
Chairman of the Judiciary Committee at that point if
Jim were re-elected. And I had these pressures I
was telling you about with family and practice. To
be up in the Legislature and not be in a leadership
position it would have been a nightmare. I would
have had to serve out two years under awful
circumstances. I was obviously concerned about
being put in that position. Our caucus convened.

MT: Do you remember what count you thought you had?

EA: I remember, yeah, we thought we had them by about 20
to 25 votes. Which would have been a substantial
margin. We really were counting and had a good feel
for it. As it turned out, I actually won by about
22 votes. I have that count somewhere - the names
of the people in that caucus and the way the vote
came out. It was a very substantial win, a
substantial margin of victory in the caucus, and here I was never having really been in a leadership position. I was Chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Committee Chairmen aren't part of the caucus leadership.

MT: It's usually something like the Majority Leader, the Assistant Majority Leaders and those are the people who would be vying for the Speakership if there was a vacancy.

EA: Right. That's typically what it is. Here you had me, Chairman of the Judiciary Committee, and nobody else. There was Joe Coatsworth, who had been in a leadership position and was also part of that process. Joe quickly saw that I had the votes and gave all of his support to me. We lost none of those. We kept all of them. So Joe shifted a fair number of votes over to me, and I was elected Speaker.

MT: Against an incumbent Speaker.

EA: Against an incumbent Speaker. Right. I remember thinking, "What do I do now?" It's like the movie "The Candidate." You know. I remember that I found that movie fascinating. Robert Redford was the star, and at the end, after he's elected, I think it was to the Senate, he says, "What do I do
now?" You know, they manufactured this candidate. That’s where I was. What do I do now? That was a stark reality on the opening day of the Session, about a month and a half after this caucus. We had to do all of our organizing, get everything ready for that. I’m sitting in my office and part of the tradition is for the former Speaker, in this case Jimmy Kennelly, to swear in the new Speaker, at least my recollection was that’s the way it was done back then. I think Jimmy Kennelly did swear me in as the new Speaker. In any event, I’m standing in the Speaker’s office and they have a little ceremony. They put together a committee to go to the Speaker’s office to get the newly elected Speaker and bring him out for the first time to preside over the Legislature, and I walked out and I stood there. You not only had 150 legislators in the House, you had all their friends and family crowded in there. When I looked out at that sea of faces, I thought, "Am I going to be able to do this?" But soon after that I found myself very comfortable with it, and that was it. That was the story.

MT: Can I ask you, what you did with Kennelly? There were some negotiations. I may tell you that a
little bit came up recently because I hadn't thought about it in years. Someone was telling me that Bob Conrad was telling the story, he's a reporter, a now retired columnist. He said that Kennelly had told him before the caucus vote that he had it by four votes and that he was stunned by the result. He lost by a substantial margin of two to one. He had talked to Kennelly, Conrad did a few days later, Kennelly was distraught and upset and couldn't figure out how all of these people who had presumably told him they were voting for him, did not. I tell you this because you said you were sure when you went in that you had the votes.

[End of Side 1, Tape 1]

In any event, he had to be given some kind of an honorary position. Not that you had to, but you decided to.

EA: I felt we needed to do something for him. Actually, I didn't gloat in that victory. I had mixed emotions. I saw how defeated Jim was, how he was really down, and I felt that I needed to do something for him. I remember finding him an office, down on the first floor of the Capital. It was a very nice office that had been used for something else, but I had it completely re-done for
Jim. I wanted him to have his own office, and I wanted it to be a good size office. I gave him a title. It was Majority Leader at Large. He appreciated it. He didn’t reject it. He
appreciated the title and the office. He was very helpful to me in those first weeks of the session.

MT: He was a master of the procedures.

EA: Yes, he was. He was helping me with the procedure. Even in terms of the verbal formula that they used. How to get a bill started. Just the things the Speaker had to say. He'd be writing things out for me. "Ernie, this is the way you say this." He was helpful. To his credit, he was every bit the gentleman with me. But it was almost too much for him. He only stayed one year of the two year term and then resigned.

MT: Then you were Speaker of the House, so you have an inside view as to the relative roll of the Legislature and the Governor. Obviously, you had some feelings at first Ella was the Governor. When you were first Speaker. How were relationships? There is still some controversy, where people say, the Governor still dominates the state government. The legislature isn't that important.

EA: That is not true. That started, again, with the Watergate era. When I was elected Speaker, I had already developed a pretty good relationship, with Ella. I was elected with her, initially, in 1974. Then she finished her first term and ran again the
year I was elected Speaker. She was stunned. By
the way, everybody was shocked when I was elected
Speaker. Nobody expected it. I didn’t even know a
lot of the people involved in the party up there. I
was an unknown. Even though I had been up there for
four years, it usually takes a lot longer to become
familiar with a lot of it. So people were
absolutely stunned. Who is this guy? Ella was
surprised that I was able to win.

MT: She had been a long time associate of John Bailey’s.

EA: Right. Ella never told me that she was hoping I
would be elected. I don’t know where she was on
that. I always viewed her as impartial.

MT: There was no evidence that she took any role.

EA: No, in fact, I think she didn’t. I think she stayed
out of it completely. I remember her telling me
that she was just so surprised that I was elected
Speaker. She was a little concerned about my being
down in Stamford, an hour and a half from the
Capital, because she liked to call meetings on short
notice. She was concerned about that, and I
remember saying that you’re going to have to learn
to live with that. You call me, I’ll come as
quickly as I can, but it’s going to take me an hour
and one half to get there. Through those years, I
developed a very close, personal relationship with her on an equal footing. One of the startling things, because of the past, I guess, where you had the sense that the Legislature was not really an equal arm of government, was that those of us who came in post-Watergate had different views about that. We were looking to protect the legislature. We wanted the legislature to be as strong as the other branches. I had a strong feeling about that.

I was convinced that you had to have a good system of checks and balances. I think the first test with Ella, was when we were looking, we were getting near the end of my first term as Speaker, and things had gone along pretty well. There were no tensions between the Governor's office and mine. She was looking to re-organize a governmental department. At the end of the session, we were changing what I think was called the Special Revenue Commission that was in charge of gaming in Connecticut. Ella had created the Gaming Policy Board to replace the commission. She wanted to make sure that her appointees to this new board were going to be appointed by the legislature before the end of the session. I wanted to make sure that the session ended in an orderly fashion. One of the things I
always wanted to do, because my predecessors didn’t, was finish a legislative session with no bills on the calendar to be debated. I wanted it to be orderly, to finish on time, if not early. Well, getting towards the end of that session, Ella wanted us to take up the nomination of her Gaming Policy Board people, and I said to her, I’m not going to do it because it’s going to take up time and it’s going to interfere with my finishing this legislative session in an orderly fashion. This is a new thing, there’s going to be a lot of debate about some of the people you’re nominated. I’m just not going to do this. You’re going to have to do this in a special session. She was surprised that I took that view. I very seldom stayed over in Hartford, but when it got to the end of a legislative session, the hours got late, and I used to stay at the Governor’s residence. She wanted me to. She invited me. She used to leave these little notes for me when I stayed over. At the time, they didn’t mean that much to me, but I used to give them to my staff when I came over to the Capital. One of the notes she left me was, “Dear Ernie, please do my policy board nominations before the end of the session.” This was after I told her I wasn’t going to do that, and
she leaves me this note with a little smiling face on it. Of course, I didn’t do it. But I gave these notes she left me to my staff. At the end of my term, they gave me a book with all Ella’s notes in it. I still have it to this day. I cherish it. It’s a great part of history. I didn’t have the same relationship with Bill O’Neill. When Ella resigned, I had nearly a full term as Speaker with Bill O’Neill as Governor. We had different views of things. Never saw eye to eye.

MT: But you had known him when he was in the legislature.

EA: Right, I had known him. He was the Majority Leader. In fact, when Jimmy Kennelly was elected Speaker, Bill became the Majority Leader. I had a lot of contact with him. He was the Chairman of the Party and the Majority Leader. Still we had differences of opinion. But with Ella, if I didn’t have to compromise what I believed in, I always supported her in whatever it was she did. In fact, this is a little off the topic, but, in the 1980 Presidential election, all the Legislative leaders were supporting Jimmy Carter who was looking to be re-elected. I was the only person to support Ted Kennedy. We had a Connecticut primary, and Kennedy
won. Of course, being a Kennedy supporter, I basked in the glow of that victory and was a delegate for Kennedy to the National Convention. Toby Moffet was a delegate for Kennedy as well. Because Kennedy won the primary in Connecticut, he had the majority of the delegates. Toby wanted to be Chairman of the delegation. Ella was a delegate for Carter, but she thought she should be the Chairman. I had been appointed to, a very important convention committee.

MT: It was credentials.

EA: It was better than credentials. It was platform. It was an important thing as these things go. But a contest came. Toby wanted to be Chairman of the delegation, and I could understand his point. After all, it should be a Kennedy supporter's chair. But because of my loyalty to Ella, I supported her in the vote for chairman of the delegation. As a result, I was thrown out of my committee appointment. Ella left one of her little notes on my pillow in the Governor's Mansion. Something to the effect, "My dear Ernie, I appreciate the noble gesture. I seem to always be getting you in trouble, Love Ella." Something like that.

MT: Did you know that she was sick. She was probably ill at that time.
EA: I did not.

MT: She died that December and that must have been July or August.

EA: That’s probably right. I didn’t know she was ill. I’ll tell you when I knew she was ill. I got a call one night from Chad McCullum, who was her aide. I was supposed to give a speech to the State Convention of League of Women Voters the next morning. He called me and said, “Ella wants to see you at 8:00 tomorrow morning.” I said, “Chad, I have to give a speech. What’s going on? Is this important?” He said, “Yeah, she’s going to pull the plug.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “She’s going to resign.” I was stunned. I got somebody else to give the speech, my deputy speaker.

That next day, I went up to Hartford to the Governor’s residence. Ella had invited me, John Groppo, my Majority Leader and also a friend of Ella’s, Bill O’Neill, her Lieutenant Governor, and Joe Fauliso, President of the Senate. She did not invite Joe Liebermann. She had her own reasons for that. I know that it wasn’t that she invited Joe and he just didn’t come. She didn’t invite him. I don’t know precisely why.

MT: He was the Senate Majority Leader at that time.
At that time, he was. At that meeting that we had, Ella announced that she had cancer. Her husband, Tom, was there, as well. It was a very emotional gathering. She was going to resign and we talked about it. Later that morning, she submitted her resignation, and I saw the switch of power from Ella to Bill O'Neill, and that was something to behold. I can almost recapture the feeling, the emptiness that I had because of the good relationship, the close relationship I had with Ella, and now Bill was Governor, and he and I didn't get along. We were always civil about it, but we had different views. Bill, you might recall, was sick. He had his heart problems back then and ended up having surgery. He was having difficulty then. He wasn't a strong Governor. He was really foundering. I had already announced that I was only going to be Speaker for two terms, a total of four years. I was coming to the end of that. So, I decided I would run for Governor. I had nothing to lose. I didn't expect that things would turn out, but I knew I had a shot at it. At that time, we had the twenty percent convention requirement. Some of the most memorable, happy recollections I have of my years in government were those months going around the state trying to
generate delegate support. Trying to get my twenty percent. We honestly had a count of about twenty-two percent of the delegates going into that convention. I ended up with, I think about fifteen or sixteen percent. But I probably would have had more. But when they saw that I wasn’t getting support in the early count, some of those who were going to support me thought, “Hey, why do this if he’s not going to win this thing?” Even with that I ended up with about fifteen percent.

MT: I would say that it required twenty percent for a candidate to then run in a primary.

EA: Right, that’s what I was going for.

MT: A challenged primary. You had to get twenty percent in the convention in order to have a primary.

EA: That is all I was looking to do.

MT: Twenty percent, such a magical number.

EA: Yeah, very difficult to get, a very tough standard.

You wouldn’t think that twenty percent would be so difficult, but then you realize that you’re running against the party machine. I would get delegates to commit to me, and Bill would get in touch with the chairman of their town committee and make some reference to the fact that they had some bonding project pending. I have often said that what killed
me was the fact that the Governor is the Chairman of Bonding Commission, and that’s where all of these towns and cities get their money to do anything. Every structure that is financed comes through the Bonding Commission. Bill would say, “Hey listen, you’ve got an item on the agenda. You guys are looking for this. I need your support.”

MT: Of course, he had been the party chairman and, therefore, cultivated town chairmen all over. He had been the State Chairman, and you were a guy from a particular part of the state. My memory of it because I was living in northeastern Connecticut, is that no one up there knew who Ernie Abate was. You were the Speaker. Bill O’Neill was known. He had been around, been the State Chairman, visited various town committees, as State Chairman. As they do throughout the whole state, so I don’t think there was an exuberance of support for Bill.

EA: Right.

MT: Old time friends.

EA: The good old boys.

MT: The good old boys, that’s the way it went.

EA: Because I became Speaker after such a short time, if I knew five town chairmen, it was probably a lot. I didn’t know any of these people because I didn’t
come through the political ranks. So it was
obviously a tough mission. But I walked out of that
convention and never looked back. I remember
thinking, "Boy, the weight of the world is off my
shoulders." Were you at that convention by any
chance?

MT: I don't remember. I was at a number of them. I
think I was.

EA: You probably were. The thing that wowed people was
when I gave the speech accepting my nomination. It
ended with a line something to the effect that if
you vote for me, the sun will come out tomorrow.

MT: Tomorrow. I remember that.

EA: I had one of the young ladies that had been Annie on
Broadway come out, and she sang the song
"Tomorrow." I had all these little girls,
daughters of campaign workers of mine, dressed in
long cotton gowns, holding arms full of carnations.

They walked onto the floor of the convention,
handing out these carnations. Everybody stood up.
I saw Bill O'Neill after that, and he said, "You
had me scared at that point. I was amazed.
Everybody stood up."

MT: I have to tell you that four years later at the
Republican State Convention. Lou Rome did exactly
the same thing.

EA: Did he?

MT: I was covering that for PBS and I saw this little girl coming out dressed as Annie and starts singing "Tomorrow, Tomorrow."

EA: I did it. They called it the "Annie Speech."

MT: Let me just ask you. How would you evaluate let's say the results of all of these changes in the Legislature.

EA: They were all good. We really set the frame work, I think, for all the good stuff that was done after '74. We talked about campaign reform. We talked about re-organized government. We streamlined government, eliminated departments, consolidated departments. We got into program review. We did campaign finance legislation. It really set the foundation for all that is still being worked on.

MT: The building which sort of was the capstone came a little bit after you but you were in the initiation of it.

EA: We started it, drew the plans. The decision to do it was made by my committee. It just took six years after I got out to get it done.

MT: It didn't open until '88. So it took some time.

EA: It did. It took six years before they actually had
that done.

MT: It was a sixteen million dollar project. There were controversies about it. Somewhat short sighted. Let me just conclude formally by thanking you very much for this interview. It's wonderful thinking back on some of this.

EA: You're very welcome. It has obviously been a long time, and my memory on some things is not very clear. I was happy to get your correspondence about this project.
MT: I'll shut this thing off and we can still chat a bit.

[End of Interview]