Would Ted Kennedy’s legislative style work today?

By Aneri Pattani  GLOBE CORRESPONDENT  NOVEMBER 16, 2015

When US Senator Edward M. Kennedy wanted the federal government to help restore the Cambridge house of poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in the 1990s, he didn’t simply type up a letter or place a phone call.

Instead, he memorized the poet’s famous work on Paul Revere’s ride during the American Revolution and recited the nearly 1,000-word poem to another senator, Robert C. Byrd, the conservative Democrat who at the time led the Appropriations Committee.

By the end of Kennedy’s emotional presentation, Byrd had come around to the Massachusetts senator’s point of view.

That type of personal touch was emblematic of how Kennedy functioned in the Senate, according to a new book by two of his advisers.

And at a panel discussion on Sunday, those who were close to Kennedy said his style could hold some lessons in an era of legislative gridlock.

“Lion of the Senate,” written by Nick Littlefield and David Nexon, explores the characteristics and techniques that made Kennedy effective both when his Democratic party and its Republican rivals were in control.

Victoria Kennedy, the senator’s widow, appeared at the Sunday panel at the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate in Dorchester. She said that Kennedy had a deep respect for his Republican colleagues. Such sentiments seem to have grown rarer today, she added.
“He didn’t doubt their patriotism or their character,” Victoria Kennedy said. “He believed that if you took the time to talk to someone and get to know them, you’d find something you agree on and could move the ball forward.”

Taking the example of family leave — a Democratic issue today — Kennedy said that her husband would have tried to craft an initiative alongside a Republican who had experienced the struggle to work and care for a loved one.

Ted Kennedy found ways to make his legislative priorities resonate on a personal level, she said.

Some panelists said that Kennedy’s personal touch would still make a difference in Congress today.

“Senator Kennedy showed it doesn’t have to be this way,” Nexon said. “No one can be his equal, but any legislator and any citizen can learn from how he did what he did.”

Others were skeptical that Democrats and Republicans could form friendships in the toxic environment of today's Washington.

Doris Kearns Goodwin, a biographer, historian, and political commentator who wrote an introduction to the new book, said many factors detract from the culture of camaraderie that existed in the past.

“People are not building the same types of relationships today,” she said. They are more preoccupied with raising campaign funds, she added.

Goodwin also faulted the media for highlighting partisan politics, as well as a culture around political debates that prizes jabs at opponents over attempts at unity.

“The process itself makes it less likely to have an extraordinary moment today like in 1994,” she said.
According to Paul Kirk, a trusted aide who briefly took over Kennedy’s Senate seat after his 2009 death, many politicians today lack the empathy that Kennedy had.

“He never forgot what it was like to be in the minority,” Kirk, who attended the event, said in an interview.

“He always reached out to his colleagues who were in the minority and included them, building up goodwill over the years.”

He often visited junior senators’ offices, defying a traditional protocol that was based on hierarchy.

He broke an impasse with a Republican senator, Orrin Hatch, over a child insurance bill by asking Littlefield, who had once been on Broadway, to sing a song that Hatch had written and recorded. The meeting began with a tune and ended with a compromise.

In a statement read by his wife, Littlefield said, “I hope the book serves as a useful reminder to both sides of the aisle of how things did and can work.”

Aneri Pattani can be reached at aneri.pattani@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter @apattani95.