



Paul and Me

AS MAINE'S FAMOUSLY STRIDENT AND ARCHCONSERVATIVE GOVERNOR PREPARES TO LEAVE OFFICE, ONE LEFT-LEANING WRITER REFLECTS ON THE PAUL LEPAGE SOCIAL DOCTRINE — AND ON SOME UNCOMFORTABLE COMMON GROUND.

BY RON CURRIE

A few years ago, after having not worked a regular job for over a decade, I took a gig with a soup kitchen on the midcoast, prepping meals and retrieving donations five mornings a week. Before I started writing books for a living, I had worked principally in restaurants, but I'd be damned if I was going back to serving overpriced food to overfed people. Instead, I deliberately went as far to the other end of the food-service spectrum as possible.

My first day on the job, when I opened the doors for lunch, I immediately recognized the people waiting outside. I knew the hunched shoulders, the hitched gaits that result when old injuries aren't properly

WE BOTH GREW UP AS THE SAME KIND OF OUTSIDERS.

rehabbed. I knew the frayed jeans, the T-shirts celebrating championships for teams that haven't won anything in a decade, the canes and the walkers and the scuffed, busted shoes. I knew, most of all, the looks of resigned patience in the eyes of those waiting to eat, the default expression of people who have long ago quit expecting their lot to improve.

I should have felt good about working there. I was feeding the poor, after all. I was a good guy, living my liberal values in a tangible and meaningful way, rather than just endlessly discussing in the abstract our obligation to help the less fortunate.

But things weren't that simple. Because while I was, in a strict sense, doing what people think of as "good work," I was also, from day one, making all manner of assumptions and judgments about our clients, beginning with my tendency to see them as part of a whole, a monolith of poverty emblematic of everything I had hated and longed to escape as a child.

A decade ago, when we both lived in Waterville, Paul LePage and I sometimes found ourselves occupying the same space. This was usually a local pub where I liked to watch Red Sox games and he liked to hold forth after city council meetings. Paul was the mayor of Waterville then and had already developed a reputation as a gruff, no-nonsense truth teller — a posture that would serve him well during his first gubernatorial campaign and that continues, it seems, to appeal to some 40 percent of Mainers who tell pollsters they approve of our outgoing governor's job performance.

I never spoke with Paul then, and I'm still not much for the beer-and-a-barbecue charm he supposedly exudes when he's not likening the IRS to the Gestapo or sputtering about immigrants bringing the "ziki fly" to American shores. I have little patience for the kind of person who praises "authoritarian power," then claims you're a "moron" for not understanding that he meant "authoritative." In general, I try to avoid direct contact with what passes for "populism" among LePage's most fervent supporters — what seems to me the simple belief that saying crude things at high volume is tantamount to being right.

And yet, I feel inextricably connected to Paul. Not because he was my mayor, and not because we spent so much time in the same town before he ascended to the Blaine

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House. The bond I feel with him is more fundamental than that and stems directly from the fact that we both grew up as the same kind of outsiders: poor French Catholics in a Protestant, English-speaking state.

For those unfamiliar with Paul LePage's origin story, it's an instant classic of childhood privation and unlikely success: *Oliver Twist* with a Franco accent. He grew up in the Lewiston neighborhood known as Little Canada, his family so poor they slept four or five kids to a bed. His father was an alcoholic who got itchy fists when he went on a bender, prompting Paul to flee home at age 11 after a particularly bad beating. Not one but two families took him in, providing him shelter, food, and structure. He worked hard at several jobs, as well as his schoolwork, but lack of money and poor English skills threatened to keep him out of college. Through the intervention of several benefactors, including the first husband of Senator Olympia Snowe, he was accepted at Husson College (now Husson University), where he continued to labor both in and out of the classroom. He went on to earn a master's degree at the University of Maine, then entered the world of business and never looked back.

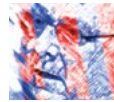
The LePage campaign used anecdotes of the candidate's boyhood life on the streets — and his determination to make something from less than nothing — to great benefit in both of his gubernatorial runs. And why not make political hay with such a backstory? Maine's electorate enjoys a rags-to-riches yarn more than most, and if grit and determination are the principal merits by which someone earned success, then so much the better.

But even the most inspirational tales of overcoming long odds aren't as pure as we like to pretend. Life rarely resembles an after-school special, and the darkness of LePage's childhood is more than just an abstraction serving as neat contrast to the prestige of the governor's mansion. That darkness endures long after your circumstances change. It haunts your sleep. In LePage, I see it manifest in his infamous temper — and, more importantly, in his attitude toward and policies regarding the poor.

Few would disagree that LePage does all he can to undermine the vectors by which government seeks to help the needy. He would have you believe, and has likely convinced himself, that this stance flows from conservative ideology and is therefore devoid of emotional content — calm and cerebral and unassailably correct. But it's my belief that LePage's rants against entitlements, his success in denying poor Mainers Medicaid coverage, and his withholding of millions of federal dollars meant for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program all come from a dark place inaccessible to reason, let alone political theory. I believe he sees the needy as an undifferentiated mass of layabouts and petty cons, forever seeking handouts, forever shirking any shred of responsibility. I believe LePage is furious with the poor, plain and simple. And I believe this because I share the governor's fury — in my heart, if not my politics.

The Waterville neighborhood of my childhood didn't have a colorful nickname like Little Canada — it was known alternately as the Plains or the South End — but it was very much a French-Canadian community. Notre Dame parish was the central gathering place, and you could hear French spoken on every street corner. My father didn't speak English until he went to school, and one of the abiding memories of my childhood is of listening to my grandmother and her friends engaging in rapid-fire patois at her kitchen table, cigarette smoke drifting overhead. In the Catholic cemetery that abuts the neighborhood, most of the headstones bear names like Talbot and Lemieux.

Like the LePages, we were poor. When I was an infant, my parents, lacking a refrigerator, used a beach cooler to keep my formula cold.



THE PRINCIPAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE GOVERNOR AND ME, I SUSPECT, HAS LITTLE TO DO WITH HOW WE FEEL.

For a long time, we slept three boys to a room, so my sister could have a room to herself. We benefited from several of the welfare programs that LePage would like to see done away with. And our circumstances were reflected in the neighborhood around us, where most everyone had more trouble than money.

Like any community, Waterville's South End had plenty of people who worked hard and took care of what little they owned. But there were others who did neither, and in my memory, these are the people who surrounded us: layabouts who whiled away weekdays on lawn furniture and stayed up all night, alternately raising hell and screaming at each other. These people drank more than they worked. They placed little value or emphasis on their children's education, and in some instances, they abused their kids more or less openly. Their yards were a blight: overgrown lawns and bushes, garbage and broken appliances.

Growing up, I despised these people in the same way I believe Governor LePage does — and that meant, in a way that a child can't really understand, that I despised myself. Like LePage, I sought escape: in books, in the friendship of children who lived in other, better parts of town. Like LePage, I eventually did escape, in real terms and for good. And like LePage, I continue to carry more of that time and those people within me than I'm comfortable admitting, even to myself.

The principal difference between the governor and me, I suspect, has little to do with how we feel — because, at least with regard to the poor, I think we feel the same way (and I am making a hard distinction here between "feeling" and "thinking"). The real difference between us is that LePage seems to have no time for information that doesn't confirm his suppositions, whereas I try to allow my feelings to be leavened by facts and experience.

Because while it's true that, at the soup kitchen, I encountered a handful of people who seemed bent on taking advantage of the agency's largesse, the majority of our clients were, quite simply and without overstatement, just trying to survive. Single mothers, retired couples, people on their lunch break from Dunkin' Donuts and Home Depot. People we wouldn't see for months, until circumstances forced them to make an appearance. Proud people who, far from sauntering in for a free lunch, would not have come at all except that their kids needed to eat.

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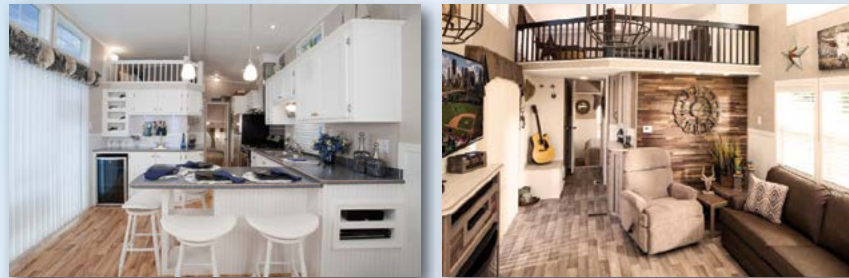
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a message of personal accountability — which has long struck me as doublespeak for, among other things, the notion that the poor deserve their lot in life. He used his own story as an exemplar of how all poor people should conduct themselves: work hard, make no excuses, accept nothing you haven't earned. It's a tidy philosophy, so long as you ignore the fact that young Paul accepted plenty he did not earn.

Consider, for starters, the two families who took him in after he fled his home. How did Paul LePage earn their mercy, except by being at the right place at the right time? To his credit, he worked long hours in one family's bakery, but plenty of people work their butts off and remain, cradle to grave, stuck right where they started. Nothing about LePage automatically meant he deserved the largesse of Peter Snowe, who paid for the future governor's first year of college. And how else to characterize a Husson dean forgiving a \$900 tuition debt that would have kept LePage from graduating, except as a handout?

"I couldn't come up with the money," LePage has said of that time, echoing the sentiments of plenty of hard-working Mainers he has kicked off the welfare rolls over the past eight years, and of plenty of those I encountered daily at the soup kitchen.

My grandfather, a man named Fred Currie, was a luckless Franco with a lazy eye who worked hard his whole life — as a bus driver, a cab dispatcher, a millhand, and so on. He was, by all accounts, an unfailingly sweet and gentle man — kind, quick with a joke, generous despite not having the proverbial pot to piss in.

Like a lot of people in the South End, then and now, Fred didn't do himself any favors. He drank as hard as he worked and, according to family legend, smoked so many unfiltered cigarettes that he only had to use one match a day, lighting new smokes with the butt of the old until it was time to turn in. He died at 49, broken by his own habits and weaknesses, certainly, but also by a Maine culture that had little use for Francos as anything but plow horses and punch lines. In the end, after a lifetime of faithful labor, he left this world as penniless as he'd entered it.

How would Paul LePage view my grandfather, I wonder? After all, Fred



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had one foot planted on either side of the governor's worthy/unworthy divide. He worked tirelessly but also drank endlessly. He was good to his children but also squandered money his family needed. Like most of us, poor or otherwise, he was a bundle of contradictions — and this is where the worship of personal accountability falls woefully short for me. Because according to the LePage social doctrine, only those with money have earned the privileges of human frailty and folly. If you're poor, you either toe the line every minute of every day or else you are undeserving of sympathy or assistance, the only value you hold as a political punching bag.

During my time at the soup kitchen, the vast majority of our clients were pleasant, courteous, and law-abiding. But as anyone who has worked in social services can tell you, there will always be clients who test your patience.

There were loudmouths, troublemakers, and bullies. There were serial line-cutters and habitual hoarders, always trying to take more than they were allowed. There was the guy who continued to fly a very large Confederate flag from the bed of his pickup truck, despite

repeated requests to take it down. There were those who came in drunk or high, flouting the agency's one hard rule, that you had to be sober to cross our threshold.

If, like me, you are prone to have a reflexively dim view of the poor, you may well see this behavior as confirmation that those seeking assistance are irresponsible. Lazy. Opportunistic. Even immoral.

BOTH OF US SPENT TIME SHIVERING IN JACKETS UNEQUAL TO THE DEEP FREEZE AND WATCHING OTHERS EAT MEALS WE COULDN'T AFFORD.

But I had to force myself to consider: how are any of these behaviors different, on balance, from behaviors we all see every day, in every context? The woman in the late-model BMW who runs a red light because it's her world and everyone else is living in it? The guy who throws a fit when he isn't seated at a restaurant with as much alacrity as he expects?

More to the point, maybe: what about me? Have I never stolen, or lied, or gotten


into a fight, or shown up drunk at a place and time when I should have been sober? And what about the governor? Has he never behaved boorishly or hoped for forgiveness? Has he never had one too many and needed a mulligan afterwards for how he behaved? Has he never done anything that reflected poorly on his character, his family, his community?

Maine is an unforgiving place to be poor. The winters are tough on those who can't afford fancy Bean outerwear, and the climate is such that a bum hip or chronic lung condition can bother you year-round. Much of what there is to enjoy about our state — ski trips, nights on the lake, indulgent seaside dining — is inaccessible to those who lack the price of admission, even if they have lived here their whole lives.


Paul and I both know this well. Both of us spent time as young adults shivering in jackets unequal to the deep freeze and watching others eat meals we couldn't afford. From our perspective in interior Maine, the postcard Atlantic coast was just that — a postcard. We both worked doggedly to improve our circumstances, and we both received a great deal of help from others in doing so. LePage speaks often about the many

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whose assistance he enjoyed on his rise from Québécois Huck Finn to the state's governor. He would be the first to admit that his life would have turned out differently if not for the generosity of others.

What I have spent the last eight years wondering, then, is why his stated reverence for community, for people helping people, stops cold when it comes to the government. Skepticism of government is not as baked in to Maine's political DNA as it is in, say, the western frontier states. Until recently, Maine had a well-earned reputation as a place where moderation and pragmatism, not rigid ideology, carried the day. Has Governor LePage ever considered what seems obvious to me: that government is, like any other human institution, merely a collection of people?

At the soup kitchen, I went out of my way to do extra for kids. This was easy — they are, by definition, blameless, so none of the uncomfortable presumptions about how they came to be there surfaced for me. I realized that the best part of their day may have been when I spent 10 minutes digging around in the food bank for a bottle of grape juice, or when I sent them home with a few extra apples they didn't ask for

but always wanted. I never took pleasure in these moments, though, because I knew all too well that a few apples were not, in the long run, going to make a bit of difference.

I wonder how the governor imagines the lives of these children will be meaningfully improved, as his was. Certainly he doesn't

FOR THE RECORD: IT IS NOT EASY BEING POOR. IT IS NOT EASY BEING ON FOOD STAMPS. IT IS NOT EASY RELYING ON MEDICAID.

wish them ill, so he must be convinced that something other than government programs will help them along. But what if they don't stumble on any benefactors, as he did? What if they lose their home and no one takes them in? What if no private citizens offer to pay their tuition, as Peter Snowe did for LePage? What if, in short, they're not as damned lucky as he was?

Moderates and liberals have expended plenty of ink and pixels trying to understand the contemporary conservative attitude towards the poor. Sometimes, though, when

I am feeling less than charitable towards my right-leaning friends and family, the simplest explanation seems to me that someone like LePage just doesn't know what the hell he's talking about — and, moreover, doesn't care to know, given that the reality of being poor contrasts sharply with what he wants to believe about it. In 2014, 86 percent of staunch conservatives told Pew Research Center that the poor "have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything."

For the record: It is not easy being poor. It is not easy being on food stamps. It is not easy sitting for hours waiting for your number to be called at a food bank or making a meal from the expired meat and liquefying produce that your patience earns you. It is not easy relying on Medicaid for your healthcare needs. It is not easy having to make the choice between eating and paying rent. It is not easy getting a job when you have no address. It is not easy keeping a job when you have no car. It is not easy working a job that breaks your body and pays little. It is not easy dodging traffic with a grocery cart full of scavenged returnables, and it is not easy digging in other people's garbage to scavenge those returnables in the first place. It is not easy begging on

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street corners, in either August or February. It is not easy to have children want things you can't afford. It is not easy to love and not be able to provide.


Imagine that Paul LePage's family understood all this, as mine did. But after eight years of Governor LePage, I wonder whether Mainer's ability — or desire — to understand this has been compromised. Something I learned during my time at the soup kitchen is that — in that context, as in all others — what you see depends almost entirely on what you're looking for.

My guess is that, given the success he has enjoyed, and given how our views become entrenched as we age, Governor LePage will only ever look for crooks and scumbags, "welfare queens" and deadbeat dads. As a consequence, his gaze will skim over the elderly couple bankrupted by cancer treatments and the CNA raising two kids on 18 grand a year. His eyes peeled for young, transient drug dealers, he will miss the young community college student. He will see the children, of course — you can't miss them, trust me — but that won't be enough to shake his conviction that everyone at the soup kitchen is on the dole simply (and solely) because they can't be bothered to help themselves.

It's a sentiment I can empathize with. I was acquainted with enough drunks, minor-league grifters, and lazy creeps in my own childhood. I know where Paul is coming from. Even today, I sometimes have to remind myself, when standing behind someone using an EBT card at Hannaford, that I have literally no idea who they are — and moreover, that whatever speculation I might engage in would be better directed at my own state of affairs, which remains far from spotless.

I have come to understand and accept that the governor's view on such matters is likely immovable. But I would like to make a modest suggestion, should he be reading this: when the governor leaves office in January and is looking for something to do, maybe he should consider a year or so at the local soup kitchen. ■

Ron Currie is the author of four novels, including *Everything Matters* and, most recently, *The One-Eyed Man*. He lives in Portland.



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