



Augustus Hawkins Oral History Interview, Part 3, July 1, 1992

Title

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Date

July 1, 1992

Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

In this third recording of Augustus Hawkins he talks about his allies in the California State Assembly, including railroad employees such as A. Philip Randolph. Hawkins also discusses issues such as housing and the successes and failures of his California State Legislature work. Hawkins then relates some key events and legislation from his time in the U.S. House of Representatives. He describes strong support from the Kennedy administration and discusses Employment and training legislation, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, known as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, the Area Redevelopment Act, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, the Job Training Partnership Act, federal aid for education, assistance for non-English speaking groups and people with disabilities, and development of childcare centers throughout the country. Hawkins expresses his views about the issues still needing attention, such as poverty, unequal educational opportunities and more. He gives advice for young people about education and opportunities.

Interviewee

Augustus Hawkins

Interviewer

Michael Grice

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh29/hawkins3/>

Transcript

Michael Grice: Congressman Hawkins, you've touched on—and I apologize for the brevity of some of the detail that we're going to explore here—but you've touched on the fair employment practices act. This was within the California State Assembly. I wanted to just revisit that a minute. At the time that you went into the California Assembly, who did you join there that became an ally? And after, who joined you that became an ally? And then I'd like you to go immediately to your transition from the California Assembly to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Augustus Hawkins: The time that I went to Sacramento State Legislature was in 1934. That was the date of the election. The first session was 1935. I've always—I've already referred to the fact that there was only one state elected official, so that obviously I was the only one in the State Assembly at the time. Most of my allies or colleagues were those with whom I worked for, obviously non-minorities. And it was one of my first attempts at trying to collaborate or become a part of coalition politics. The principle supporters were the railroad employees of that day, I might say, because one of my heroes was A. Philip Randolph, and I was very much impressed with what he was doing to organize the Pullman porters, and indirectly to organize minorities all over the country. And so that—it was not long before there were many African Americans who were in key positions in the labor movement in employment and training fields that were my principle supporters, and those with whom I worked, and that was obviously the main thrust of a state fair employment act. We had other issues, of course. We worked very strongly in the housing fields. At that time slum clearance and the first building of public housing came about, and I was the first member of the Assembly to offer a slum clearance and low-cost housing program. And for a number of years we worked on that. The first bill that we passed through the State Legislature was vetoed but we were able to come back and pass it over the opposition, the governor of the state at that time. And the other great issue that we worked on was a compulsory health insurance program, which we were never really able to pass, even though our efforts continued even into the modern era. But nevertheless we did improve such things as mental hospitals and community health centers, so that we somehow failed in some of the major attempts; there were fallouts of byproducts, let us say, of the battle to get them, by making, improving conditions in the various fields that we worked in. Later we were joined in the state assembly by a second African American, Byron Rumford from Berkeley, California, pharmacist and a druggist who came to Sacramento and who was largely identified with health issues, and we campaigned for him because we thoroughly believed that we needed some additional support in the State Assembly, and for a number of years Byron Rumford was a very active elected official. We sponsored a fair housing act which I was led to—which was defeated, but again was put as a state initiative, which was also defeated unfortunately.

[00:05:30]

The rest of the story I think surrounds the attempt to get through the representation in the Legislature, keep minorities in key positions on state commissions. We'd never had any on a state commission, and we got them on the Athletic Commission, the State Housing Commission as part of the Fair Employment Practices Commission, when we got that passed, and in other, on other commissions.

MG: Were these gubernatorial appointments, or?

AH: These were gubernatorial appointments. At the time that I was elected in 1934 a democratic senator from Los Angeles, Culbert Olson, was elected, who later became governor, and through—and it was in his administration that we were able to get the state commissions, also to get the first black elected or appointed to a judgeship and so on.

MG: I wonder about—now you're moving into the U.S. House of Representatives and we won't be on that topic very long, so I guess the idea is the transition and key events or key legislation and any stories related to that.

AH: In 1962 an opportunity developed to create a new congressional district. The district that I represented in the Assembly had long been represented by non-minorities who didn't even live in the congressional district, and that year, right after the 1961 census report, we were entitled to additional seats. And so several congressmen, including Jimmy Roosevelt who was in the Congress at that time, gave up parts of their district to create a district that was based primarily in the—composed out of the assembly district that I had represented for a long time, and I ran in that district. And it so happened that was the year that, also that John F. Kennedy was president, had just become president, and he strongly supported the move. And so it was a very easy matter to go from Sacramento to Washington, from State Legislature to Congress, because I had strong backing, quite different from my earlier years in politics where we had to scratch for

everything. It so happened that we got strong support from the Kennedy administration. And so in 1962 I just simply moved from Los Angeles to Washington and became a young congressman at a time where we did have democratic administrations. And so it was a good time to be in the Congress, because the possibility of doing things were very, very good.

MG: What acts or legislation do you remember most fondly, both in terms of its creation and/or it's satisfaction for you? Obviously your career has given you some great moments of satisfaction as you look back on it and see the progress that was made, particularly in face of the odds that you were against. As you think about your years in the U.S. House of Representatives, again with an apology because we're intending to compress it into a sound bite, but what kinds of things do you recall there from the legislative standpoint that—

AH: We continued the great emphasis on bread and butter issues, and one, as I recall, one of the first great interests that I had was in employment and training. So we began to sponsor employment and training legislation that would lead to the development of skills so that we could—we felt that that was the easiest way to get minorities into the mainstream, into the economy. We were also just in time for the Civil Rights Movement, which was beginning then, and we became actively involved in the Voting Rights Act. One of the earliest things, however, that I uniquely became involved in was—

[00:10:43]

MG: I'm going to interrupt you just for a second. [Tape cut]. You were talking about the civil rights era, civil rights legislation.

AH: Yeah, so we were quite—

MG: You have to back up just a second and start your thought in a complete point.

AH: When I came to Congress, the Civil Rights Movement was just getting underway. One of the first things we did was to actively push for a voting rights act, and that came about in 1965. Secondly we were also strongly interested in, as part of the background, our background in Sacramento, was an Equal Employment Opportunity Act, and we co-sponsored with Jimmy Roosevelt the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, which became Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Even the Kennedy Administration was reluctant to put such an act, a title, into the Civil Rights Act, because they felt that it would burden it down and it would be dangerous, but over that opposition we still did it, and the Kennedy Administration agreed to sign it. On the employment side we were also involved, as I've indicated, in employment and training, and so we started out with first the Area Redevelopment Act which had to do with concentrating on areas that had high unemployment, and we were able to get the title into the Area Redevelopment Act so as to take care of those areas that had somehow been bypassed with the recovery, and at that time, prosperity. That laid the foundation for some of the later things that I enjoyed sponsoring. The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act led out of this beginning, and from The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act under the Reagan Administration when, by edict, the president abolished CETA, we then shifted to the Job Training Partnership Act, which is currently on the law books. All of this came out of the committee that I was on, the Education and Labor Committee, and in each instance it was my bill that eventually got passed. So we continued with that interest in employment and training. It was in education, however, that I think some of the best results from our efforts were obtained. I was part of the move, in 1965, to actually achieve federal aid to education for the first time. There was—had always been a fear that if the federal government contributed money to education, that they would also control it, and that was feared by some of the liberals even who didn't—who wanted the money but who didn't want to see the federal government moving into federal control. We were able to overcome the opposition, however. It had been opposed by religious groups who wanted, obviously, to promote sectarian interests or values. It was opposed by the southern democrats who felt that we would break down segregation, and who opposed—but somehow under the Johnson administration we were able to put the pieces together and get federal aid to education for the first time.

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And out of that 1965 act we have, over a period of time, been able to pass other acts which improved, expanded and extended aid, primarily to special groups; disadvantaged and language speaking groups, the non-English speaking groups, to the handicapped who were not even admitted into the schools at that time. We were able to get individual groups

included in federal assistance to education, and eventually we were able to sponsor and get a Department of Education. And so gradually this was a good background. One of my principle interests in all of it was also the matter of childcare. I had passed the first childcare bill appropriating money to childcare in California. And as a result of that I also brought that same interest to Washington and became heavily involved in the development of childcare centers throughout the country. So these were some of the more positive things, I would, say that we were actively involved in.

MG: As you think about the obstacles that you faced, your—number one—your reception in Congress, how your fellows either grew to like you or to fear you, and two, we're moving now into reflecting on what still is needed, what's missing. As you think back about if you had it to do over again, what was left out or needs to be attended to better or more directly now?

AH: Obviously, while gains were made, we are a long way today from some of the hopes and aspirations we had at the very beginning. There are many problems today that we had anticipated being practically solved by this time. We never anticipated that, for example, that poverty would escalate the way that it has in this country. We had always hoped that equal educational opportunities would be achieved by the 1990s, and in a way we've had setbacks, I think, in many of these areas rather than continuing to gain. I would phrase it somewhat this way: that over an historical development in the country, that we started out with good principles. We didn't always practice them; we started out with democracy, equality, freedom and a public school system to bring not only basic education and high order skills to every child, and all of these visions, and up to a period of time, up until let us say the 1980s, we were achieving, we were adding to, we were broadening out the number of individuals who were brought under these principles of equality, but since 1980 we have somehow been sidetracked and we have in a sense lost in many of these areas. In other words, the country itself has deviated at a time when the global demands will greater challenge us than ever before, and that's about where we stand in terms of trying to evaluate the future. There are many negative trends that I think are threatening today that we must recognize and do something about them. The biggest negative trend in education is that gains that we had made under Johnson and the Johnson-Kenney concept are now being lost and that our public schools, for the first time, are really being challenged. And there is a threat that we will reverse that trend, that earlier trend that from the very beginning; we changed from private, select, sectarian schools as a colony to public, compulsory free schools common to all. And while we didn't have all of them, we were constantly adding. We were progressing. And now we are just reversing that trend and now talking about private select schools which we had during colonial days. And this is a great threat, and to me the greatest threat, because it simply means that we will lose our competitive position in world trade and commerce, and again, I go back to a situation that we found untenable as we became a new nation.

[00:20:46]

MG: I remember Major Owens recently sounding that same alarm, and you basically answered the question that I wanted to begin to close with. I have one other and that was around the challenges that you are left with, your colleagues, that we must face: the adult leadership. And I think that you got mine, and very well, and we'll go back and take a look at this. And it's no secret you've been coming from that for some time. I'm going to put you now in front of a classroom of sophomores, juniors in high school who haven't quite finished; they're on their right track. There are a couple things that you've learned that's important for them to keep in mind as they set their course. So what would you want to be sure and have them observe, or what principles would you encourage them to—or values to inculcate in their best interest?

AH: Get the best education one can, because without that an individual is not free, an individual is not able, is not able to qualify for the opportunities that I think will develop as we become more scientific, more technological in our outlook. It's going to take something more than what we have at the current time. And so without those qualifications civil rights, for example, would be meaningless, because an individual will not be able to be accepted in an institution, an education institution, in a work setting, so forth, without those higher order skills.

MG: That concludes my interview for this time. We've worked you really hard and I know that it's hot in here, and you can turn on the air conditioner and we'll get some comfort beginning to circulate, but I want to thank you. And we're on home video now, so... [speaking to Gene] did you break the knob off just when we're at the hottest point in the afternoon? I think that just for the record I should swing the camera around and capture Gene McConnell [spelling?].

AH: Capture the old assistant? What's a matter Gene?

MG: Well, supposed to have been in the—

AH: Are we off now?

MG: Yeah.

[Background conversation about broken knob on air conditioning unit].

[end of interview 00:24:17]