

Weekend Confidential: Olympia Snowe

Is there a future in bipartisan politics? The former senator aims to find out

By ALEXANDRA WOLFE

Olympia Snowe is having lunch at the Monocle, the same Washington restaurant where she spent last New Year's Eve, during her final week as a U.S. senator. That night, she stayed until 2 a.m., not to celebrate the holiday but to take a break after the last-minute negotiations to avoid the fiscal cliff. The Monocle, its walls covered with photos of congressmen and senators (including herself), is a place where she still feels at home, in a town that she knows well after 34 years on Capitol Hill. Waiters pass by exclaiming, "Senator Snowe!" They know she wants the peasant-style Greek salad.

Wearing her trademark black ponytail, pearl earrings and necklace atop a bright pink blazer, Ms. Snowe is in town for meetings with the Bipartisan Policy Center. Rebuilding cooperation across party lines is her focus now, as she promotes her new book "Fighting for Common Ground." It is partly a biography but mostly a blistering critique of Congress. Though she lays much of the blame for how Congress has gone wrong on the Obama administration, she also calls her own Republican Party "a shadow of its former self." When she decided not to seek re-election last fall, Ms. Snowe shocked both parties, but particularly Republicans, by ceding a valuable seat in the Senate. She wrote her book to explain her decision.

As she talks to former staffers who pass by the table, congratulating her on the book and asking after her husband, John McKernan, the former governor of Maine, it feels as if she were still in office. You would never guess that just months before she had packed up three decades' worth of belongings and shipped them home to Portland, Maine. To get her book done in time for spring, she spent 18-hour days writing at her desk overlooking Portland Harbor.

Ms. Snowe doesn't miss Congress or the "dysfunctional environment" of D.C., she says, rolling her eyes. Congress used to engage in more of a healthy debate, she says, but now it is an all-out brawl. "I don't mind fighting," she adds. "I've done that all my life."

Raised in Augusta, Ms. Snowe lost her mother to breast cancer when she was 8, and was sent to boarding school at St. Basil Academy in Garrison, N.Y. Her father died of heart disease a year later. After that she was raised by her aunt and uncle; her uncle also died a few years later.

She first became interested in politics at St. Basil. There, in 1960, Ms. Snowe led a straw poll for Richard Nixon in his race against John F. Kennedy. "I acknowledge it was an uphill battle," she laughs. "But I knew then that I was interested in politics and being a Republican." She remembers plastering posters around campus at age 13 and making speeches on Mr. Nixon's behalf. He won the school poll, if not the presidency.

She went on to major in political science at the University of Maine, and married her first husband, Peter Snowe, who became a state legislator. But soon after he was elected, he died in a car accident. She had

accompanied him the day he was sworn in to the Maine House of Representatives, and the two of them debated who would sit in his chair for a newspaper photograph. Ms. Snowe ended up sitting while he stood. She ran for his seat and soon found herself taking that same chair, this time as a state representative. "It was eerie," she recalls.

Her second husband, Mr. McKernan, had been a colleague of Mr. Snowe's. They didn't start dating until she ran for national office. As Ms. Snowe picks at her salad, she smiles and remembers what she told Mr. McKernan when he was thinking about running for the House of Representatives in 1976. "Boy, I'm glad you're doing it, not me," she said. He eventually decided against it that year.

In 1978, she ran herself and won. (Mr. McKernan later served in the House as well, from 1983 to 1987.) Ms. Snowe still remembers her first office in Washington, where she shared a cramped seventh-floor space with two other members of the House. "It was a pretty rundown office and had big holes in the carpet," she trails off, thinking. "I loved every minute of it." She remained in the House until 1995, when she was elected to the Senate.

Ms. Snowe thinks that President Obama is largely responsible for the economy's downward slide, as well as for the lack of bipartisanship in Washington. "Many of the presidents I've worked with considered it the norm to work with the legislative branch consistently and systematically," she says. But in recent years "that hasn't occurred as it should have." She thinks that if the president had encouraged bipartisan meetings and more socializing across the aisle, he would have paved the way for tangible results on economic issues. "President Reagan did that, and Clinton did, too," she says.

Though Ms. Snowe likes President Obama personally and finds him "forthright...knowledgeable and personable," she laments that "he didn't use those attributes to work in the country's favor." She is quick to applaud the president for how he handled the early days of the financial crisis, but she thinks the administration took the stimulus off track by immediately pivoting to health care. That "basically detracted from the continual focus that was necessary for the economy," she says. The White House did not respond to requests for comment.

The administration also fell short with tax reform, a failure that Ms. Snowe thinks led to the downgrade of the government's Triple-A credit rating for the first time ever. "It was a horrific event for the country," she says. "To repeat that fiasco with the fiscal cliff...it's put the whole country in a state of uncertainty."

But these aren't the only factors that led to Ms. Snowe's decision to leave. "The red states are getting redder and the blue states are getting bluer, and you see that divide manifesting itself in the House and the Senate," she says, in part because outside organizations like super PACs are now financing campaigns. "The forces of polarization are very well funded and very well organized," she says. "They demonize individuals and points of view before you even have a chance to have a thoughtful debate."

And she is pessimistic about the future of the Republican Party. "They have departed from the essence of what Republicans were all about," she says. "It's a party that seeks a divide," she says, blaming Republicans for a lack of tolerance on social issues. "It used to be we could always accommodate [all views] under one roof, but some days I think they're trying to fold their tent into an umbrella."

Re-energized since leaving office, Ms. Snowe is now trying to promote consensus-building, this time from outside the government. She has launched a website called Olympia's List, where she praises politicians of both parties who are "closest to the ideological center" and calls for grass-roots efforts to support them. "That's what tea party [groups] and Occupy Wall Street did," she says, two organizations she considers more effective than Congress has been lately.

Would she ever go back into government? "I'm not planning on it," she says, looking around at the Washington crowd. "Frankly, I don't even see it on the horizon."