

A PRIVILEGED CONVERSATION: CARL SANDERS REFLECTS ON HIS CAREER AND THE CURRENT STATE OF POLITICS

Sometimes you get to do something for free that you would pay for the privilege of doing — like having a two-hour conversation with one of your political heroes, former Georgia Gov. Carl Sanders. He even bought lunch. It doesn't get much better than that.

I got to know Gov. Sanders while he was a member of the board of directors of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games, but I had admired him from afar long before that. I voted for him when he was elected in 1962, and I voted for him again in 1970 when he ran against Jimmy Carter for governor and lost.

Looking fit and trim at 81 years old — the former UGA quarterback works out three days a week — Sanders reflected on his political career and the current state of politics in Georgia, and dispensed some advice to the current generation of officeholders in the state.

His tenure as governor came at a critical time in the state's history as the South grappled with the volatile issue of integration. "Looking back," he said, "I wasn't thinking about history then. I was thinking about doing the best I could as governor, and as it turned out, some of the work I did has stood the test of time."

Sanders, generally considered the first "New South governor," led Georgia through one of its most turbulent periods and put the state on an economic path that helped it leapfrog past neighboring states, in part because of the way the state handled its civil rights issues. "At the time I was elected, Birmingham was as well positioned — or maybe better positioned — as Atlanta, but look what happened there," he said. "We had some tensions in Albany and Crawfordville and a few other places, but we were able to avoid significant clashes in our state between law enforcement and people who were protesting."

The governor talked about the support he received from white business leaders such as Robert Woodruff, the legendary Coca-Cola executive and philanthropist, bankers Mills Lane and John Sibley, Atlanta Mayor Ivan Allen, along with the black leaders of the day: Leroy Johnson, the state's first black senator, State Rep. Grace Hamilton, educator Benjamin Mays, and Martin Luther King Sr. Collectively, they were instrumental in keeping a lid on the emotions of both black and white Georgians. "I will always be grateful," Sanders said, "to these business and community leaders for their support of my efforts."

Sanders also credits his predecessor, the late Ernest Vandiver, for making the decision to keep the state's universities open when politicians like Alabama Gov. George Wallace were blocking the schoolhouse door to keep black students out. Sanders, then a state senator, admits he "strongly" counseled Vandiver, in an emotional meeting with the governor and members of the Legislature, not to close the University of Georgia.

Did he feel a lot of pressure to knuckle under to those who wanted to emulate our neighbors in Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas and other Southern states? "Not one bit," Sanders says with emphasis. "I knew what I was going to do. We were going to follow the law of the land. I appointed the leaders in the Legislature, and they knew they had better support my programs. Otherwise, they wouldn't be in the leadership for long."

Such tactics wouldn't fly today, he admits. "When Lester Maddox was elected governor, the Legislature took a lot of political power away from the governor's office, and they have never given it back."

Sanders doesn't think having Georgia governors eligible for two terms is necessarily a good thing. "They become risk-averse in the first term so they can get re-elected," he says, "and then take eight years to do what previous governors did in four." He cites Roy Barnes as an example of a risk-taking governor, whose first-term activism cost him a second term.

We finally got around to talking about his run for governor in 1970 against Jimmy Carter. "Jimmy Carter effectively used race as a wedge issue against me," Sanders says matter-of-factly. More next week on the sleazy campaign Carter conducted, the one he would like you to forget.