John F. McNichol in 2009. The Delco GOP power broker died on Dec. 31. (RON TARVER/ Staff...)

The passing of the former director of Delaware County's data processing center might seem to be of little consequence.

Yet crowds of powerful politicians as well as average citizens showed up to pay their respects to John F. McNichol last week. The scene was reminiscent of the lines that formed to say goodbye to Philadelphia's longtime Republican leader, Bill Meehan, in 1994. The two men were close friends, and they left behind important lessons.

It's well known that candidates for offices ranging from the presidency to state legislature consulted McNichol because he knew how to win elections. What's less known is that he cared about policy as well as politics, and his relationship with Meehan was crucial to winning state support for projects that were important for the city and the region. What counted for them both was not who got the credit, but what got done.

Both men were sons of successful politicians. Both had rowhouse-based organizations that were legacies of a bygone era. Both were Irish Catholics who inspired loyalty and tamped down intraparty rivalries by force of personality. And both valued the ground game in politics even as polling, focus groups, and media advertising came to dominate campaigns.

Neither was actually chairman of his county party organization. Meehan was the Philadelphia GOP's lawyer; McNichol was the Republican leader only of Upper Darby, with a bureaucratic title in Delaware County government that belied his importance.

During the years I represented Philadelphia mayors and business leaders in Harrisburg, a pattern took shape: Philadelphia-based (but regionally important) projects would be threatened by suburban and upstate Republican resistance, which also complicated suburban Democratic support. The city sought Meehan's help; Meehan sought McNichol's; and the two then approached other suburban party leaders.

In 1986, after a proposed Center City convention center was defeated twice in the state House, Meehan and McNichol went to work and, with other regional GOP leaders, secured enough votes to pass the bill. The story was similar for other important projects, including dedicated capital funding for SEPTA; the
state purchase and upgrade of the city's dilapidated port terminals and piers; and the construction of what is now the Wells Fargo Center.

Meehan and McNichol also supported policies with social and economic consequences even when Republican politics might have dictated otherwise. They backed state tax increases that enabled a Democratic governor to avoid massive service cuts. They helped Philadelphia escape a bankruptcy that could have been blamed on a Democratic mayor. And they supported a law requiring suburban employers to withhold the wage taxes of city residents despite its predictable unpopularity.

McNichol kept helping Philadelphia even after Meehan's death, believing that what was good for the city was usually good for his county's urban centers, and vice versa. State legislators from Upper Darby developed and championed state education funding reforms very similar to those advocated years later by Gov. Ed Rendell. McNichol supported legislation enabling a giant UPS hub at Philadelphia International Airport and gaming laws that brought investment, jobs, and revenue to Philadelphia and Chester.

A loyal but not unthinking Republican, McNichol endorsed Ronald Reagan for president when many party leaders thought the former Hollywood actor could never carry Pennsylvania or win a national election. Many years later, he told George W. Bush's closest advisers that their politics were driving suburban voters to the Democratic Party.

Despite adverse trends and an influx of minorities who tend to support Democrats, McNichol died with his county and his township in Republican hands. Indeed, the stability of the county's GOP organization over many decades helped its legislators rise to leadership roles.

Meehan and McNichol understood that, as the fictional Mr. Dooley put it, "politics ain't beanbag." They believed that parties needed resources, including access to at least some government jobs, if they were to control interest groups and deliver tough votes when deals had been made. Both supported candidates whose hardball tactics sometimes infuriated their Democratic opponents.

But McNichol and Meehan also believed that when the election was over, it was over. Neither thought it was his job to oppose every policy goal of the other party just to win the next election. The good they did for the city and the region - and the political lessons they can still teach us - should not be forgotten.

R.I.P., John F. McNichol.

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