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(Photo source:  
Senator May)

## **Senator Edgar May, (D-Windsor); Author of Change A Historical Note on a Legislator of Today**

By Ricka McNaughton\*

To prepare for his new job in a welfare agency in upstate New York, “Preston” May grew a mustache and donned a pair glasses that gave him fierce headaches. He left the post six months later, at which time he shaved the mustache, removed the glasses and dropped the alias. Edgar May had completed his field assignment as an investigative journalist for the *Buffalo Evening News*. His double life had been gloomy and edged with risk, and the ruse must have stunned May’s welfare agency colleagues. But later, they had everything to thank him for.

May subsequently wrote 14 articles focusing fresh attention on a range of poverty issues and the performance of government assistance programs. He did not attack the competence of individuals. He exposed the failings of a system, and his writing brought results: Improved services to clients. Better salaries and lower caseloads for social workers. The series also brought Edgar May a 1961 Pulitzer Prize for investigative journalism.

“It’s ancient history,” said May, with a look that proclaimed, Don’t make too much of it. It proved more than a professional honor.

For May, a chief outcome of the Pulitzer was an itch for more outcomes. Shortly afterward he wrote a book called, *The Wasted American*, pointing out the cost of poverty to a society which, as yet, barely conceded the problem. The book had an unexpected outcome for May. It brought a summons from Kennedy appointee and Peace Corps founder R. Sargent Shriver.

May recounted, “Shriver said, ‘I’ve read your book and I want to know when you’re going to stop criticizing (government) and start doing something.’ ” May agreed to take a 30-day advisory post in Washington. He left ten years later.

“A journalist,” observed May, “is always one step away from change. A politician or a public manager can be an instigator. Even the best investigative reporting requires government to move on what you’ve researched.”

Vermont Legislator Edgar May was elected to the House of Representatives in 1974, and later to the Senate. Since 1985, he has served as Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

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