

WISCONSIN'S NEW "NEW DEMOCRATS" AND WHY WISCONSIN LIBERALS HATE THEM

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St a t e Representative Frank Boyle says he still can't believe what's happening — and pounds the table to reinforce his point. Only a few weeks ago, he and his 44 fellow Wisconsin Assembly Democrats voted to endorse tax breaks for two percent of the state's largest businesses and a fuel tax break for Midwest Express Airlines.

"Democrats crawling into bed with business?" the Superior Democrat shouts incredulously. "We've forgotten who we are. We've forgotten we represent working people."

"I'm telling you, there are no liberal Democrats anymore!"

Meanwhile, it's noon at a Greek restaurant near the Capitol. Representative Shirley Krug is pondering her sandwich, looking a bit tired as she reflects on the last few months. "It's been a long, grueling, spring," shrugs Krug, the former university economics instructor who is now the Democratic leader of the Wisconsin Assembly.

The Legislature accomplished very little — and it took hundreds of hours of empty debate



to do it. On top of that, the Milwaukee Democrat has been on the road constantly. As head of the Assembly Democratic caucus, she's been raising campaign money, recruiting candidates and crafting campaigns for enough candidates so that her Democrats can retake control of the 99-seat house. "I can't even count the hours," says Krug, trying to recall her

last month of campaign work.

But then she smiles.

Pro-business Democrats now lead the Wisconsin Assembly's Democrats — and people are responding, she says. "We've actually raised more money than the Republicans. I'm convinced we can re-take the Assembly this fall."

Krug says her team has the candidates, the strategy and the money to pick up several seats in the Assembly this fall that will put Democrats back into the majority when they meet again next January. That means committee chairmanships, control over the legislative

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agenda and a voice in spending more than \$40 billion in state taxpayers' money every two years.

Further, she says, her cabal of young, mostly urban, pro-business Democrats represent a national trend which, she adds, will more than likely mean Democrats will re-capture the U.S. House of Representatives — and, eventually, all of Congress.

Krug's team is a new breed of Wisconsin Democrats. They're proponents of welfare reform. In fact, they claim they were the ones who first proposed "Wisconsin Works," the state's comprehensive work-for-benefits welfare system. "We even came up with the name," Krug says. They've been highly supportive of tax breaks "to help keep Wisconsin's businesses competitive." And they've voted consistently with Republicans on tough-on-crime legislation ranging from dozens of penalty "enhancers" to existing sentences for crimes to Governor Tommy Thompson's plan to eliminate parole in Wisconsin.

These are Democrats who say they've got a more mature view of the role of government. "Republicans believe in getting rid of government. Liberals believe government should be everything to everybody," says Rep. Antonio Riley, D-Milwaukee, a leader of the national pro-business Democratic movement and an early advocate of "Wisconsin Works."

"New Democrats believe government should play an active role in society — that government can be a catalyst to help people. But we also believe people should take responsibility for their own lives."

Riley goes further: Liberals have actually hurt the poor by assuming they are unable to think and act for themselves. "The poor don't want to be rubbed on the head," he says. "They want jobs and the opportunity to fulfill their dreams and values."

But are these "New Democrats" the future of Wisconsin's Democratic Party? Can these Democrats' rise in the Wisconsin Assembly translate into votes and political victories throughout the state?

Their philosophy is wildly controversial within their own caucus — and Republicans seem almost bemused by what they view as attempts by Democrats to become more like them.

"We've already won," laughs Steve Baas, a spokesman for Assembly Speaker Scott Jensen. "We've moved the political debate to fit our agenda — tax cuts, smaller government, safe streets and family values. Even if Shirley does pull off a miracle and regains five seats to retake the Wisconsin Assembly for the Democrats," he says, "the Legislature will be acting on our agenda."

Many Republicans come close to laughing out loud when they hear the words "fiscal conservative" and "Democrat" in the same sentence. "Do they really think they're the more fiscally responsible party?" they ask.

So far, however, the "New Democrats" have seen some victories.

These "New Democrats" are actively courting the business community, especially in Milwaukee. And the business community is responding. At a Milwaukee fundraiser at the Pfister Hotel starring former Texas Gov. Ann Richards, the Democrats raised \$100,000. At a function in May at the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce bankers and realtors flocked to the event that generated \$20,000.

Further, they see themselves outflanking conservative Republicans on their own turf. Conservative Assembly Republicans led by Scott Jensen have left a political vacuum by taking a hard line on tax cuts — and waging a campaign of social legislation that is relatively meaningless, such as new laws defining marriage, Riley says.

"Republicans have us spend a lot of time on issues nobody cares about — school uniforms, redefining marriage, flags in schools," says Jeff Plale, a freshman Democrat from Milwaukee. "We've had 30 votes on abortion this session," Krug says.

"I speak to a lot of CEOs," she adds. "Their view is that Jensen has no vision beyond tax

cuts. The CEOs have a lot of other issues — labor issues, training issues. Tax cuts aren't the only thing that drives economic growth in this state.”

Many Democrats are not happy with their new leadership. Liberal Democrats protest that Krug, *et. al.* are selling out “traditional Democratic values” that will cost the party heavily in the long run.

“This is a failing strategy,” says Mark Pocan, D-Madison, a leader of the Assembly Democrats’ liberal faction and himself a top candidate recruiter and fundraiser for Assembly Democrats. “You have to show people differences in the two parties. If you don’t, people don’t think voting makes a difference. If they don’t feel they have a choice, they’ll stay home. For Democrats, low turnout means Republicans win.”

Instead of cozying up to business, Pocan says, Democrats should be leading the charge for “traditional Democratic issues,” helping the poor, providing more money for education and job training, and fighting hard against special tax favors for big businesses.

“I wish they were embarrassed by it,” says John Nichols, editorial page editor of the *Capital Times* and a nationally published liberal commentator.

The polls, and past voting trends, indicate that Wisconsin is still a relatively liberal state, supporting candidates such as Michael Dukakis and Walter Mondale, he says. Becoming more like Republicans may win in the short-term, but “without ideas of your own, you lose in the long run.”

“Ask yourself this,” Nichols explains. “If Democrats really are Republicans, why would

voters care who wins? Does it really matter if Democrats take over?”

“Harry Truman once said that if voters are given the choice between a Republican and someone who acts like a Republican, they’ll eventually chose the real thing.” Republicans took power precisely because they demonstrated to voters that they represented a clear philosophy — and they nurture and encourage people to vote. “I respect them for that,” he says.

But the “New Democrat” Representatives — Krug, Riley, Jeff Plale, Milwaukee, Bob Ziegelbauer, Manitowoc, Jon Richards, Milwaukee, Dan Schooff, Beloit, Jim Kreuser, Kenosha — are unapologetic. In fact, they insist that if Democrats “cling to traditional values” they’ll be relegated to the abyss of minority power — with no influence at all over the future of Wisconsin state government.

Remember, they say, that Democrats were blasted out of power in the 1980s after Ronald Reagan and fellow conservatives did a masterful job of depicting Democrats as a coalition of people living on the fringes of American society.

The “New Democrat” is part of a national movement called the Democratic Leadership Council started in the South after Walter Mondale’s sound defeat by Reagan.

Democrats will regain power by “caring about issues that people care about,” Krug says. “It’s a values-based approach. We care about education, safe-schools, safe communities and economic opportunity.”

So while “Scott Jensen is talking about school uniforms and miniature tax cuts, we’re working on helping provide jobs for people,” says Riley, now the national chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council. “It all comes

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down to economics. People want to work. This is not some warmed-over Republican idea. We are building bridges.”

“New Democrats” are in a unique position to bring labor and business together, he says. They can tackle common issues such as the need for better education and training programs, transportation issues and trade issues such as protectionism.

“You’re seeing new alliances even today in Wisconsin: teachers and realtors and bankers,” Riley says.

“New Democrats” are also better at setting priorities, Krug insists.

Republicans have authored hundreds of crime bills over the last four years (that many Democrats supported). But Krug wants all future crime bills to be accompanied by a cost estimate — and a plan to pay for them. “This is just common sense,” she says. Suddenly, lawmakers have to prioritize — do you want another prison or smaller class sizes?

“New Democrats have been around awhile,” Riley says. “But now we’re in a position of leadership.” And the direction that leadership is taking Democrats is setting a pattern of victory for Democrats around the state.

Of course, nothing in politics is that simple. Democrats have regained power in the State Senate, for example, and they did it largely without either the “New Democrats” or extremely liberal members of the Legislature. They did it one seat at a time, pouring huge amounts of time, effort and money into key Senate districts to win back seats in Racine and Beloit — and fighting hard to retain seats in suburban Madison and northern Wisconsin.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Chvala, D-Madison, talks passionately about “traditional Democratic values” — smaller class sizes, protecting labor, observers note. But his real strength — and his success — is based on the fact that he’s a notoriously aggressive bargainer and fundraiser. He’s also a very strong

leader that doesn’t allow for much ideological expansionism. “Chuck controls virtually everything,” said one Democratic member who did not want to be named for fear of retribution.

Complicating the debate is that there are few real fiscal conservatives anywhere in the state Legislature. Chvala, Jensen, and Governor Thompson have been playing very fast with other people’s money, agree both Senator Bob Jauch, D-Poplar and Senator Robert Cowles, R-Green Bay.

They’re spending money they don’t have in the form of new programs and tax cuts — and have created a “structural deficit” in state government that may top a half a billion dollars. “That’s money we’ll have to raise and spend before we even begin crafting the next state budget,” says Cowles, who truly is a fiscal conservative. “If we every have another recession — and we will — we are going to be in serious trouble.”

New Democrats aren’t prominent in the race for governor, either. The Wisconsin Democratic Party’s potential candidates for governor span a wide spectrum. Nichols calls US Representative Tom Barrett, D-Milwaukee, a “true progressive” in the Wisconsin tradition, while US Senator Herb Kohl, was a successful businessman when Ronald Reagan was still making movies. He didn’t need the DLC to help him hone a pro-business agenda. In the middle is Attorney General James Doyle, who comes from liberal roots but has taken a pragmatic approach to the political issues he’s had to face as the lawyer for state government under Thompson.

And don’t count out Assembly Speaker Jensen — the Waukesha Republican who helped engineer the takeover of the Assembly from the Democrats who has had a clear vision of tax cuts and smaller government — and that the Democrats have fought them at every step. That’s a point they’ll take to voters at every opportunity.

Finally — and ironically — both sides conclude their analysis of the Assembly’s “New Democrats” with the point man in this debate: the quintessential “New Democrat” — President Bill Clinton.

Clinton is proof that the idea of a “New Democrat” is a political loser, Nichols says. Clinton has eschewed his political base, selling out environmentalists and labor unions through wide-open world trade policies while, at the same time, watching his party take millions of dollars in corporate contributions, Nichols notes.

Democrats have suffered for Clinton’s short-term gains and lack of clear ideas, he says. Clinton himself has never won a majority of voters — and voter turnout has plummeted with him at the helm. In the end, voters will chose “the real Republicans” as Truman predicted, he says, or will stay home. Democrats, including Vice President Al Gore, could get clobbered in Wisconsin as Democrat-leaning voters stay home — and that would be proof of the emptiness of the “New Democrat” strategy, he says.

“This is a wet dream of Republicans and corporate types that the Democratic Party will become a pale reflection of the Republican Party,” he says. “They’ve won.”

Clinton’s presidency (minus the peccadilloes) is the model for the future of the Democratic Party, counter Plale, Krug and Riley.

When Republicans pulled this country too far to the right, Clinton realized that

Republicans were obsessed with issues that no one was discussing at the family dinner table, Plale says. Focusing on trade, education and economic development, Clinton has helped spark the longest period of economic success in this country — creating jobs and allowing working people to improve their lives, they note.

And Clinton has won, taking the White House away from the Republicans despite their best attempts to destroy him — and “New Democrats” are winning around the country, as well, Riley notes.

Democrats are again making inroads in the South where the majority of governors are pragmatic Democrats. Gray Davis, a fiscally conservative Democrat, now heads the nation’s most populous state. And Democrats have a very strong chance of retaking the U.S. House of Representatives and keeping the White House this year.

“The world has changed,” Riley says. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was an “us-versus-them philosophy” in world trade, world politics and in employer-employee relations and business competition.

“Most people’s loyalties lie between liberalism and conservatism — and you can be pro-labor and pro-business. In this new economy, you have to be because the success of one depends upon the success of the other.”