

# WHAT NOW FOR THE DEMS?

## THEY'RE ALL REVVED UP WITH NOWHERE TO GO

BILL LUEDERS

Spirits were high at this year's Democratic Inaugural Gala, where Wisconsin's leading Dems feted newly sworn-in members of the Legislature and toasted the news that Governor Tommy Thompson was stepping down after 14 years as governor. The January 3 event, less than a week after Thompson tearfully announced that he was accepting George W.'s call to become U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, was held in the Madison Civic Center, a stone's throw from the state Capitol. And indeed, a few stones were thrown.

"Governor Thompson's had such a lock on the levers of state government, it opens up a whole new ballgame," said state Representative Mark Miller. Others gleefully predicted tough sledding for Thompson's successor, Scott McCallum. "It's like following the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show," quipped state Senator Jon Erpenbach. "It's an extremely tough act to follow."

But the Democrats' self-consciously crafted main theme was not recrimination but anticipation. "We're optimistic and enthusiastic," beamed Senate President Fred Risser. "We're



rarin' to go." "Things are as optimistic as they've been for a long time," agreed Attorney General Jim Doyle, one of several Democrats who plan to run for governor in 2002. "There's a sense of change in the air."

As well there should be. Love him or hate him, Tommy Thompson was a political juggernaut. To say that he left his imprint on Wisconsin is like saying the

Beatles had some influence on rock music. Thompson seized the machinery of state government, picked it apart, and reassembled it in his own image. He was in the truest sense a reformer, a man who in such areas as welfare and education saw things as they were and said, "Why not try something completely different?" In the process, he dramatically increased the size, scope and cost of state government, far beyond what any Democrat would have dared. The fact is — and as a Madison progressive in good standing it cuts me like a knife to admit it — Thompson's stature as a political leader from Wisconsin rivals that of Robert M. LaFollette. Pardon me while I bleed into a bucket.

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Not only did Thompson successfully advance his agenda, he stymied the Democrats. He went from being the Dr. No of the state Legislature to the Mr. Forgetaboutit of the governor's office. Wielding party loyalty as a club and his veto pen as a sword, he stopped Democratic initiatives dead in their tracks.

So now that Mr. Thompson has gone to Washington, has the boot been removed from the Democrats' back? Can the party now pick itself up from the dung heap, brush off the you know what, and advance confidently in the direction of its dreams? Does the party even know where it wants to go and how to get there?

Senator Fred Risser, the state Legislature's longest tenured member, points out one salient feature of Wisconsin's new political terrain: "A majority of the legislators have never served under any governor but Thompson." Risser, who in his 45 years as a state lawmaker has seen ten governors come and go, speculates that this may make McCallum's adjustment to his new job more difficult. Moreover, Risser feels the Legislature's Democratic leadership, himself included, has far more experience than the new governor: "We should be able to assert ourselves."

McCallum, asserts Risser, is off to a very poor start. His proposal to trade away \$5.6 billion in payments from tobacco companies over the next 25 years in exchange for a lump sum payment of \$1.26 billion now, including a few hundred million McCallum needs to make up for a revenue shortfall, is "very shortsighted." His plan to increase general purpose revenue spending on the state Department of Transportation by \$105 million over the next biennium, compared to just \$26.3 million more for the UW System, smacks of "misplaced priorities." McCallum's proposal to help seniors pay for prescription drugs is woefully inadequate.

On these and other issues, Risser seems to envision the Democrats playing the role of the loyal opposition — criticizing the governor and other Republicans, stopping them from getting away with their worst excesses. Risser

cheerfully concedes the point, saying one of the most important functions of the Legislature — especially the Democrat-controlled Senate — is to keep bad bills from becoming law. In other words, he's decided to embrace the virtues of gridlock.

"To say that either side is going to come up with grand initiatives is fantasy," asserts Risser. "The other side will stop them." As long as the Republicans control the Assembly and the governor's office, he says, the best the Democrats can hope for is "to hold the status quo." He expects this will continue "until one party or another can control the agenda."

There are issues, like campaign finance reform, in which Risser hopes there will be forward movement with bipartisan support. (He calls the escalating cost of getting elected "the one thing that's apt to ruin our democracy more than anything else.") And he thinks the budget bill, which requires passage by both houses, is a chance for the Democrats to have a real impact. In fact, he calls the budget conference committee in which compromises are hammered out "a mini-Legislature in itself," albeit one that "unfortunately" relegates power to a handful of party leaders.

But asked what the Democrats can accomplish now under McCallum that they could not before under Thompson, Risser draws a blank. "That's a good question," he says. "I'm ..." The words he hopes will flow forth don't. "That's a real good question."

Shirley Krug has an answer — sort of. She thinks Scott McCallum's ascent to the governor's office presents an opportunity for the Democrats because McCallum is vulnerable in ways that Thompson was not. Krug, the minority leader of the state Assembly, says Thompson was able to vastly increase state spending on education and steer a moderate course on social issues, "and businesses couldn't complain because Thompson was very friendly on their issues of interest."

McCallum, she suggests, can't perform the same magic trick. Projected budget deficits and a downturn in the economy have compelled

him to be more frugal than his predecessor — although, Krug chides, “it doesn't take a lot to be more frugal than Governor Thompson.” Hence the fee hikes (“huge surtaxes on the electorate”) and other austerity measures in McCallum's ill-received biennial budget.

“This is not a budget with which to make friends, and McCallum needs a lot of friends right now,” says Krug. Moreover, the cutbacks McCallum is seeking undermine his ability to govern as a centrist, *à la* Thompson. What does this mean for the Dems? “It's going to enable us to expose more of the stark philosophical differences between the two parties.”

This opportunity, Krug believes, is compounded by the Scott Jensen factor. Because the assembly speaker has not ruled out challenging McCallum in 2002, the new governor must be solicitous of conservative voters who could help Jensen pull off a coup in the primary. Krug says this is making McCallum lean “further to the right” than he otherwise would. Again, what does this mean for the Dems? “It means our opportunity to recapture the governor's office in two years is enhanced.”

During the November elections, says Krug, Republican legislative candidates campaigned on “Democratic issues” like helping seniors with prescription drug costs, but now she thinks the gig is up. While state Democrats have proposed a plan that would cover an estimated 335,000 seniors at an annual cost of \$106 million, the plan McCallum unveiled a week before becoming governor would cover just 82,000 seniors and cost about \$25 million. In fact, Krug notes, McCallum's budget contains “not a penny” for this program. McCallum team members say the state can seek a waiver to redirect existing federal medical assistance funds. But Krug calls McCallum's failure to

put his money where his mouth is “one of the most cynical political moves I've ever seen.” And she's seen a few.

On other issues, Krug says the Democrats want to continue the state's commitment to smaller class sizes and provide a modest amount of state money to help schools reconfigure space into physically smaller classrooms. To protect the environment, she favors restoring an independent public intervenor and Department of Natural Resources secretary. And she says it's time for the state to reverse trends that have led to runaway prison costs.

On this last issue, Krug favors a bipartisan proposal that would require the Legislature to pony up two years' worth of funding whenever it passes legislation that affects prison sentences. Simply deciding to lock people up for longer periods — a main reason the state's inmate population has risen from 5,736 when Thompson took office to more than 20,000 today — is, says Krug, “fiscally irresponsible.” Having a

pay-as-you-throw-away-the-key rule will force starker choices, like: “Do we want to build more prisons or fund the prescription drug bill?”

But like Risser, Krug seems to think that most of what the Democrats hope to accomplish will not be possible until they reclaim the governor's office. “In the end,” she says of McCallum, “he still has the veto pen.”

Ed Garvey relishes a chance to talk about what Wisconsin Democrats should be doing. The Madison attorney has been the party's nominee in races for U.S. Senate and governor, yet still manages to come across as an outsider. Some of his ideas — for instance, that no one who contributes more than \$100 to the governor's campaign should be allowed to serve on

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the UW Board of Regents — may work better as applause lines than as policy proposals. But at least he's generating ideas.

As Garvey sees it, much of what goes on in the Capitol, and within state government as a whole, is simply irrelevant: "There is a disconnect between the Democratic office holders and the people." If the party wants to reconnect with citizens and advance its agenda, he says, it has to stop worrying over who gets appointed to which committee and "get involved in battles that affect people's lives."

On issues like Perrier's plans to pump millions of gallons of spring water from Adams County, and proposals to run gas pipelines and electric transmission lines from other states through Wisconsin communities, Garvey says the Democrats as an entity have been absent without leave. "Citizen groups are springing up because they see these issues affecting their lives, and the Democratic Party is not a relevant factor."

Garvey thinks it's foolhardy for Democrats to "wallow in nostalgia" for the days when there was a public intervenor and the DNR secretary was appointed by a board of people appointed by the governor rather than by the governor directly. He, too, liked things better the old way but says citizens fighting transmission lines and Perrier need action now: "What are we waiting for?"

Similarly, as the attorney representing inmates in a class-action suit challenging the state's new Supermax prison in Boscobel as constituting cruel and unusual punishment, Garvey can't believe he hasn't received more in the way of Democratic Party support.

And then there's the hot-button issue of racial profiling by police. Demands Garvey, "Where is the anger from Democrats who get consistently 80% to 90% of the African American vote?" In fact, the Republicans have done a better job exploiting this issue than Democrats. On March 6, Governor McCallum signed an executive order requiring state law enforcement agencies to enact policies prohibiting racial profiling.

Here and elsewhere, Garvey thinks the Democrats' failure to take strong public stands plays into the Republican's hands. On campaign financing, for instance, he says Democrats are pursuing "timid proposals" like raising the voluntary check-off on tax forms from \$1 to \$3 instead of embracing true reform — i.e., full public financing. Party insiders, suspects Garvey, want to keep the spigots open because they think they can "run with the big boys." He says this strategy is doomed to fail: "Whoever runs for governor [as a Democrat] will be overrun by the Republican opponent, probably McCallum, who will have 10 million to 15 million to spend and will be our next governor." Geez, Ed, don't sugarcoat it; you can give it to us straight.

As I wait in the lobby of the Dane County executive's office for my interview with Kathleen Falk, it occurs to me that Garvey is right: For Democrats to claim Thompson's departure strengthens their position in 2002 is bonkers. After four terms, Thompson was almost certain to finally follow through on his promise to not run again. If he hadn't bowed out in mid-term, the Republican field for governor would be wide open, and the Democratic opportunity maximized. Instead, McCallum will have two years to establish himself and raise money. The Democrats will be at a disadvantage, as they were during all those years of King Tommy. To beat McCallum, they'll need to do something different.

Enter Falk, who is considering joining the field for next year's gubernatorial race. As the chief executive of Dane County (which includes Madison) since 1987, Falk has made it her mission to be a different kind of politician. The former state public intervenor is a lifelong Democrat who was recently named Feminist of the Year by Wisconsin NOW. But Falk has worked with realtors and other conservative interest groups to craft her land-use agenda, and she endorsed the local Republican sheriff for reelection (over a rival running as a Democrat). She counts Republican Christine Todd Whitman, former New Jersey governor and Bush's controversial pick to head the U.S.

Environmental Protection Agency, among her personal heroes.

Rather than engage in partisan squabbles, Falk focuses on finding common values and opportunities for agreement. Ask her a pointed question, and she'll reframe it in a way that minimizes the possibility that someone might take offense. What should state Democrats do? Falk won't go there. "What is my view?" she clarifies.

Falk's view is that the people of Wisconsin have a few shared "simple goals" such as kids, land and jobs. She says what's happening in Milwaukee is tragic, "the percentage of kids who don't get past eighth grade, kids with no hope." Immediately, she expresses equal concern for school kids in rural areas in northern Wisconsin, where different challenges are present. Likewise, on the issues of land-use and jobs, she strives to include all of Wisconsin in positioning common values like love of nature and providing for one's family.

Falk says discussion of areas in which she disagrees with Republicans like Thompson and McCallum is "not useful." The closest she comes to being critical is on the issue of prison policy. "Half the folks in jail and prison have chronic drug and alcohol problems," she says, lamenting that the system's "automatic and only response is to lock people up." Dane County, she notes, has pioneered a successful jail diversion program for young offenders that some say should be a model for the rest of the state.

Citizens, she says, are frustrated by gridlock. They don't care about party affiliation so much as forward progress. So what role should the Democrats play — in Falk's opinion? "To be the moral voice," she says. "To be the leaders they are on these values."

Each of the prominent Democrats I spoke to have valuable but limited perspectives. Falk is right to want to bring people together, but politics is contentious, and involves taking sides. Garvey is right to rip the Democrats for not getting involved in the struggles of real people, but it's not as though lawmakers can abandon the task of governing and brandish placards proclaiming "Down with Perrier." Professional players like Risser and Krug are right to be pragmatic about what is and isn't attainable, but this is hardly inspiring, and the Democratic Party needs leaders who inspire.

What should the Democrats do? My view is that they should stop spending so much time and energy positioning themselves. If the party really does stand for something (a big if), then it should stand for it on principle, whether or not it helps secure some partisan advantage. There is a world of issues out there on which the Democrats can and should be weighing in.

Consider the example of two of the state Legislature's best and brightest Democrats: Representative Spencer Black of Madison and

Senator Gwendolynne Moore of Milwaukee. Each generate a flurry of ideas and advocacy that serves not just their constituencies but also the interests of a vital democracy.

In recent months, Black has challenged rules that allow utilities to file secret documentation to the Public Service Commission, called for the abolition of the Electoral College, importuned his colleagues to enact emergency protections for Wisconsin wetlands, blasted Governor McCallum's proposed \$10 million cut in state funding for local recycling programs, and cosponsored a bill that would require financial aid grants to increase at the same rate as UW System tuition.

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Moore, meanwhile, has inveighed against racial profiling, sought additional state funding for child care, called for an educational campaign on felon voting rights, repudiated calls by Republicans to require that voters produce state-issued photo identification cards, fought for greater public access to records regarding the treatment of state prison inmates, co-sponsored legislation that would make health insurers cover the cost of contra-

ceptives for women, and sponsored a comprehensive Election Reform Bill that would, among other things, establish uniform poll hours, create a legislative committee to study multi-lingual voting needs, and let municipalities set up "satellite voting stations" to register voters and accept absentee ballots.

Call it leadership by press release, but it's leadership nonetheless. And the Democratic Party of Wisconsin needs all it can get.