

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

October 7, 2002

Breaking a PartyMold

To which party does the following politician belong? He was recently endorsed by a group of black pastors, who said he “has the kind of integrity that takes him beyond the political party.” *And* he voted for a bill that tightens welfare laws by urging recipients to work 40 hours a week.

He is strongly pro-life on the abortion question *and* also has strong support from several labor unions. He serves on the board of directors of the NAACP, *and* he supported a bill that allows the government to contract with faith-based social-service organizations.

In the state legislature he stood almost alone against fellow party members and the governor who wanted a law that would have delayed unemployment compensation payments by a week in order to cut state expenditures. *Yet* he also supported his governor about 90 percent of the time while serving as the majority whip in the state’s house chamber.

This politician scored 45 on a nonpartisan survey’s scaling of legislative votes, with 100 being hard left and 0 being hard right. A politician like this might be a Democrat or a Republican, or perhaps an independent. But from the information listed above, you would surely wonder what motivates him to take such unusual stands and to act in ways that obviously break the mold.

The politician in question is Paul DeWeese, a Michigan Republican from the Lansing area and a leader in the state legislature. Our reason for calling attention to him now is that he is running for the state Senate in the 23rd district, which covers most of Ingham County around the state capital of Lansing.

DeWeese is a physician—an emergency room doctor—who entered politics about a decade ago with the aim of staking out a principled position of his own as a *public justice* representative. He doesn’t care whether he looks liberal or conservative to those who attach such labels. He simply wants his positions to add up to a coherent stance for the public good.

DeWeese has supported some tax cuts and budget cuts, but in a recent column addressing the state’s budget crisis he said, “It is time to reassert the notion that public action on behalf of public justice is necessary for a decent society to flourish.” Speaking to fellow legislators, especially those in his own party, he said that cutting the Healthy Michigan Fund by 50 percent is a mistake that will “have a profound and long-lasting impact on public health. Breast and cervical cancer screenings for uninsured women will be slashed. Immunizations for children will drop. Prenatal care for pregnant women will be decimated, leading to increased birth defects and preventable complications of pregnancy.” And how, he asked, “can it be considered ‘conservative’ to completely spend our rainy day fund in order to pay for a tax cut?”

Paul Hillegonds, a former House speaker and fellow Republican, says of DeWeese that he “has a strong sense of justice and compassion that causes him to vote differently than other Republicans.” DeWeese’s opponent this fall in one of Michigan’s most closely watched races—and one of the most important races for both parties—is liberal Democrat Virg Bernero, who says, “In many cases, DeWeese’s Catholic beliefs trump all. But, in cases where DeWeese feels a human justice question is at stake, [he has] voted with Democrats.”

Overlook for a moment Bernero’s slighting of the Catholic concern for justice and his implication that Democrats alone give attention to justice questions. The fact is that DeWeese could beat Bernero on November 5 in a district that is 56 percent Democrat, and if DeWeese wins, it won’t be first of all because he is a Republican. If he does win a Senate seat, he might then be able to do even more to advance one of his greatest political ambitions: “to cross the chasms of race and be a reconciler.”

—James W. Skillen
President

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The Center for Public Justice

P.O. Box 48368 * Washington, DC 20002 * 410-571-6300 * Fax 410-571-6365 * www.cpjustice.org *
capcomm@cpjustice.org

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