Special Ed

Doug Ireland turns his eagle eye on Vermont, where a truly unusual Senate candidate weighs in to deserve HIVers' support.

February 1, 2000 By Doug Ireland

Imagine what a difference it would make to inside-the-Beltway debates about HIV issues to have an openly gay senator who lost a partner to AIDS. This year it could happen: In Vermont—a relatively progressive state with a fondness for mavericks—popular four-term state auditor Ed Flanagan is on the verge of becoming the first-ever openly gay Senate nominee of a major political party.

Democrat Flanagan, a 48-year-old Harvard-trained lawyer and former football player (he was an all–Ivy League defensive end), came out publicly in 1995 after winning a second term as auditor. "Jesse Helms was saying that the victims of AIDS should be punished and Dick Armey was calling Congressman Frank 'Barney Fag,' and that tipped me over the edge," Flanagan says. "I thought it was very important to offer the public a personification—a face—as an example of what the gay community is." Since then, he has been reelected twice by increasingly comfortable margins, the last time by 13 points.

Now the country's only openly gay official to have won election statewide, Flanagan has built his popularity as auditor by crusading for fiscal responsibility (most notably by issuing a series of reports exposing government waste in contract compliance) and by using his office as a Ralph Nader–type consumer watchdog, particularly on health care and retirement-security issues. He has also lobbied successfully for more state AIDS funding, and for seven years he has served on the board of Vermont CARES, the state's largest ASO.

Flanagan is running for the seat held by GOP moderate Jim Jeffords, the Senate's most AIDS-friendly Republican. Jeffords was a cosponsor of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) and has consistently fought for increased spending for the Ryan White CARE Act, earning a leadership award from DC's AIDS Action, which called him "the leading voice of moderation on health care issues in the Republican Party."

However, Jeffords also voted for the GOP's 1997 Balanced Budget Act, which contained cuts in AIDS funding as well as in Medicare, nursing-home and home-care coverage; he supported the 1996 welfare "reform" bill, which gutted basic protections for poor HIVers; he voted last fall against the strong "patients' bill of rights" legislation; and he backed the GOP's $897 billion tax

cut for the 1999 budget, which necessitated slashing social and health-service programs across the board. Ultimately, Jeffords remains a creature of the odious Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, who has declared same-sex love a “disease” like alcoholism and kleptomania.

Opinion surveys also show that Jeffords’ negatives have risen in the past few years. Folksy but inarticulate, Jeffords seems to have foot-in-mouth disease; for example, on a local radio show not long ago he referred to date rape as a “private matter.”

Moreover, on the crucial issue of lowering the cost of prescription drugs, Jeffords—an ardent harvester of political action committee (PAC) funds—is heavily in hock to the pharmaceutical and health care industries. According to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics, nearly a third of Jeffords’ campaign cash comes from the drug, insurance and doctors’ lobbies. By contrast, Flanagan—who has a broad donor base—largely eschews PAC money. Despite this, he has already raised nearly $500,000, making Flanagan genuinely competitive with Jeffords’ fundraising—thanks in part to early support from the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, in its first-ever endorsement of a Senate candidate.

If, as is likely, the Vermont State Supreme Court renders a favorable verdict on gay marriage before the November election, some political analysts think voters opposed to same-sex unions might register their dismay by voting against Flanagan. (Jeffords voted for the gay-bashing Defense of Marriage Act [DOMA].) But the auditor, a supporter of marriage equality who campaigns with his current partner of five years, attorney Isaac Lustgarten, says he’d “relish the opportunity to state clearly that all Americans deserve equal rights—I have an abiding trust in Vermonters’ commitment to fairness.”

The earlier Flanagan can further grow his campaign war chest, the more attractive it will make his candidacy to the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee as it sets priorities—he deserves your support, the sooner, the better.

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