Voter Fraud

The new “nice” Congress looks even nastier than Newt’s

February 1, 1999 By Doug Ireland

The Republicans in the new Congress may be in search of a kinder, gentler public face after they had their House majority shaved in last fall’s elections, but make no mistake: The deposing of Newt Gingrich does not improve the prospects for any advance on AIDS-related issues. Here’s why:

The new House speaker, Louisiana Republican Bob Livingston, is a more genuine part of the Christian right than Newt ever was. A devout Catholic who regularly consults the reactionary bishop of New Orleans on political matters, Livingston is an arrogant and authoritarian conservative hard-liner on economics. He owes his election as speaker in part to a handful of Christian zealots who blackmailed Gingrich into quitting by threatening to vote against him on the House floor, even if Newt won a majority of the party caucus. The kind of backroom deals Livingston had to make with social conservatives in order to secure their backing can be discerned from his conduct as chair of the Appropriations Committee, where he attached to money bills amendments banning federal funds for abortion and needle exchange. Livingston, unlike Gingrich, is a skilled legislator who will build cross-party coalitions that could pass regressive bills such as the Ackerman-Coburn HIV Partner Protection Act.

The new Congress is more conservative than the old: A large majority of the newly elected Democrats in the House—such as Kentucky’s Ken Lucas and Mississippi’s Ronnie Shows—are neo-con New Democrats or right-wing Southern “Blue Dogs” who will strengthen that chamber’s 40 to 80 Democrats who frequently vote with the GOP on social issues targeting gays and people with HIV. And in the Senate, although the numbers didn’t change, Carol Moseley-Braun’s replacement in Illinois by the scary Republican Peter Fitzgerald means the loss of a progressive vote to a homo- and AIDS-phobic bigot, while Ohio’s new GOP senator, George Voinovich, will be even further to the right on social issues than conservative Democrat John Glenn. Democrat John Edwards may have knocked off reactionary Republican Lauch Faircloth in North Carolina, but he ran praising Jesse Helms and will vote like Louisiana’s Blue Dog Democrat, John Breaux.

There was, of course, some good news for us in the last elections. Wisconsin’s Tammy Baldwin is not only the first openly lesbian member of Congress, she’s an unabashed progressive who has made universal health care for all her prime issue. And four states approved referenda (and voters in a fifth, Arizona, upheld a previous referendum) in favor of medical marijuana, an issue of

particular concern to many with HIV. But voters rejected gay rights in Fort Collins, Colorado, in Fayetteville, Arkansas, and in supposedly gay-friendly Ogunquit, Maine (by only nine votes). In a crushing defeat, same-sex marriage was voted down in Hawaii after the Christian Coalition and the Mormon Church dumped in millions of dollars; gay marriage was also banned in Alaska.

Since the gay movement is often on the cutting edge of AIDS issues, one cannot review last year's voting without touching on the scandalous endorsement by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) of incumbent New York Sen. Al D'Amato. HRC endorsed this odious Republican despite protests from a broad spectrum of local gay organizations—and then HRC boss Elizabeth Birch had the gall to lecture New Yorkers via The New York Times that they "didn't know D'Amato's record." But they did—from D'Amato's years of gay-bashing to his refusal, as the state's GOP boss, to force Joe Bruno, the man he handpicked to lead the state Senate, to bring hate-crime and antidiscrimination bills to a vote. Only 14 percent of gay voters voted for D'Amato, a major factor in his defeat by Chuck Schumer.

All this raises the question of which direction gay and AIDS activists should take in the coming years: the top-down, go-along-to-get-along establishment strategy being pursued by HRC or a return to a grass-roots approach that gives primacy to local organizing. Tammy Baldwin won because she knew how to organize—she had 2,000 people in her field operation—and how to build coalitions, especially with organized labor (something that moves like the HRC D'Amato endorsement render more difficult). Another parade in Washington, D.C., like HRC's insipidly named and increasingly divisive "Faith and Families" march planned for 2000, wastes money that should go into communitywide work to build real political power. Voter turnout will be the key in 2000, as it was in '98: Last year, a switch of only 9,500-odd votes nationwide would have given the Congress back to Democrats. If the Christian right's agenda is to be blocked, it will require a strategy for building from the bottom up.

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