

Confessions of a Freshman

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By WILLIAM TONG

As a freshman legislator, I should probably be frustrated by the process, or the gridlock, or the struggle to get things done. Or maybe just by my low standing in the Chamber. But I'm not. I've been surprised, in fact, to discover that being productive and effective is largely a matter of effort. What is most frustrating, on the other hand, are the labels and assumptions we have to overcome to begin working at all. Me Democrat. You Republican. Liberal. Conservative. Moderate. *Politician*. That last label is the worst of all. Because I chose to run for office and to serve, colleagues or constituents can sometimes make negative assumptions about my motivations, my judgment, my effectiveness, and worst, my integrity.

This leads to a very real embarrassment, at times, about politics and public service, which last time I checked, is not something we should be ashamed of. (It's even worse than the other label I wear every day - lawyer!). Make no mistake — I am a strong and committed Democrat. I believe in the power of government and the law to ensure legal, economic and social justice where the free market fails, and that strong leadership can effectively manage and deliver public goods. I strongly believe there are very real differences between the major parties. But more often than not, party-affiliation proves too much, and labels and false assumptions can kill a productive conversation, or worse, prevent people from talking at all.

I can tell you that it can be different. In my first hearing on the Judiciary Committee, I sat right next to the leadership. I suppose I did this to be close to Andrew McDonald and Gerry Fox so they could stop me if I had the sudden urge to say something that could end my career before it started. The seat to my right was empty at the start of the meeting, reserved for the Republican Ranking Member, State Representative Arthur O'Neill. Shortly after the meeting started, Art came in quietly and sat down. He lost his mother that very afternoon, after a long illness. But he was there, doing his job. His grief was palpable, quiet but severe, and for the rest of the hearing I could only wonder how much strength and commitment it took for him to be there and to fulfill his responsibility. The first thing I knew about him was the depth of his humanity and commitment, and that was really all I could see. The fact that he was a Republican, or a Ranking Member, or maybe an adversary, seemed to be of very little value. I am certain that is a major reason why he and I were able to work so well together to pass landmark gun control legislation this session, a bill he had worked hard to defeat in the past.

In my experience, it's a pretty short hop over the party-affiliation wall to find a safe place to talk. It's even shorter within one's own party. So as we begin our conversation on this blog, I hope we'll work together to develop a shared vision of progressive leadership that transcends labels and assumptions. Not by simply conceding a point or two, but by respecting, hearing, and trying to understand one another. I hope we'll develop a kind of leadership that begins where Art and I started - as two decent and honorable human beings, doing our best to find pragmatic solutions and advance our state and its people as honestly, cooperatively and as capably as we can.

3 Responses to "Confessions of a Freshman"

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1. 1 Genghis Conn Oct 25th, 2007 at 3:40 pm

Thanks for writing this, Rep. Tong. When we simply apply a political label to our opponents, we forget their humanity, and we focus on what divides us rather than on what unites us. I'm glad to see that there are people in government who don't fall for this trap.

2. 2 MikeT Oct 25th, 2007 at 4:40 pm

I think most Connecticut residents would be appreciative of a legislator from either party who demonstrates that getting things done in government is their top priority and not just posturing for the sake of their party. Thanks for this.