Chopping Down the "T" Tree

Adams County May End Logjams

By ROBERT M. KNIGHT | PT

To our progressive neighbors in York, half of Cumberland County and Shippensburg over in Franklin, who make up Pennsylvania's 19th Congressional District: We hope you have an opportunity like ours and don't muff it next month – something we have been inclined to do.

To make sure you don't, go to the damn polls on Nov. 8.

Off years like this one usually benefit the party in power, the better organized party, because more of them show up. For us in Adams, that might be a good thing, because last year governor and U.S. senator races topped the ticket, and we stunk at getting out the vote. That was last year.

Even in a good year like 2008, when a highly popular Barack Obama was featured on the ballot, we struggled to make 40 percent. This year, what we do have is a couple of very good people, Paul Kellett and Marty Qually, running for the Adam County commission. More on them in a moment.

It wasn't completely the local Democrats' fault that they blew it so badly in the T. They can thank Democrats in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh for part of the failure. And maybe they're better off without the big guys. Let me explain.

We live at the base of the T. Now, anyone who has lived in Pennsylvania for more than 24 hours is likely to know what the T is. (If you do, ignore this paragraph and the next one.) It's a mostly rural, fat I, running through the middle of the state, topped with a bar and featuring triangles, called serifs, jutting out from the ends of the bar and from the base of the I. (York County makes up one of those serifs.)

The remainder of the state consists mainly of two circles, each with maybe a 100-mile radius, surrounding Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. One sometimes stretches up to the Lehigh Valley – Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton.

The circles around the T center on the commonwealth's two major cities. They are mostly urban and make up most of Pennsylvania's population. Those within the circles usually vote Democratic; those within the T, Republican. So it's easy for Democrats, including progressives, to fly over or drive through the main part of the T on their way from one circle to the other.

You can't fault their logic; go where the votes are. And, yes, last year, Dan Onarato stopped by to pick up a few election dollars in his race against Tom Corbett; if he'd done so a few more times, he might have beaten Corbett and become governor.

We can sympathize, though. He had problems at home. The county executive from Allegheny, which includes Pittsburgh, didn't do much to get the vote out in his home county.

In Adams, we were lucky to see Joe Sestak several times during his Senate campaign against Pat Toomey. But most of his visits proved to be whistle stops before small knots of dedicated Democrats – again, mainly for fundraising. It was a good conventional campaign strategy, but obviously not good enough.

But back to our county commission race. Here's what Democrats and progressives have going for them:

1. Two highly qualified candidates who are not averse to working with each other to gain a majority of the three commission seats. (By law, one of the three must be from the other party.) Kellett and Qually are near opposites in personality and political style, but both are electable progressives who so far have worked as a team.
2. A bunch of highly p.o.'ed Republicans who want to sweep away any vestige of the old commissioners, none of whom won nomination to run again this year. Those commissioners boxed themselves in. They left themselves no choice but to dictate an enormous property tax hike to make up for growing shortages that they ignored for at least a decade.
3. Two GOP candidates who are called wing nuts – that's a technical term. These are people who, even some Republicans believe, are not fit for office.

That first asset, though, could easily turn into a liability if Kellett, Qually and the supporters of each decide only one Democrat is going to make and therefore "bullet vote" to make sure the other Democrat loses. Such thinking has ensured conservative-led incompetence and kept Adams County in the – if not the dark – at least the gray ages.

In the past, bullet voting worked for a few Democrats. In Adams County they have a history of doing nothing and still getting rewarded by the dribs and drabs the Republicans leave on the table. It made sense for the few. And it made sense for Republicans who filed on both ballots to make sure they got some of those leavings.

The Dems, though, aren't as they once were. Although they still make up only 30-40 percent of the county voters, the county party committee now boasts hungry, active members who say that the bullet vote is the icon of a loser or, worse, a traitor.

The key to Democratic success, though, remains their ability to get the vote out, a huge task in an off-year election when many progressives get too busy to vote. We can only hope neighboring Democrats successfully overcome the same hurdle.

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