

The Rise and Future of Rick Mirabito

Rick Mirabito is my friend. We do not agree on everything. In fact, we have had some fairly intense disagreements, whether they be about how state public sector pension reform should be handled or Middle Eastern politics. Rick is a passionate, virtually brilliant and totally committed man. Soon to be former Representative, Mirabito is one of those few people I have known who is ideological and practical at the same time. Make no mistake about it, Rick is no milk toast. When he feels strongly, he feels very strongly. In the end Rick has always listened to my point of view and provided valuable feedback.

It was a great triumph when Rick Mirabito became the first Democratic Representative, since Bob Wise, for an area covering the City of Williamsport and some of the “suburbs”. Bob was a lawyer in town, for whom I have the greatest respect. He perhaps became head of the Legislative Reference Bureau in Harrisburg, a very important organization involving the drafting of legislation for the entire legislative branch of government. Rick was a worthy successor to Bob Wise.

Most surprising, and perhaps even amazing to me, was the scope of Rick’s wins in prior elections, even when Barack Obama headed the ticket. That did not seem to make any difference to Rick Mirabito’s victory margin.

The question is, what happened this time? Why was Rick so decisively beaten by Jeff Wheeland? What changed?

There are those who make a convincing argument for the fact that Rick’s downfall was caused by the very negative relationship he developed with Vince Matteo, Executive Director of the Williamsport/Lycoming Chamber of Commerce. The question of the hotel tax has been a serious and burning issue to Rick for many years. Rick’s closest insider friends, including myself, advised Rick to stay away from the issue. Mirabito, however, felt differently. He was not about to be discouraged from pursuing an issue that he thought was valid just to save his political career. Is that a good or bad quality?

In sum, Rick was upset about the fact that the Visitor’s Bureau gets tax money via the pipeline of the Chamber of Commerce, and uses that money for a variety of community needs, including low interest loans on at least one occasion to a developer. Rick wanted to know more about how the Visitor’s Bureau was constituted, what the County had done to give the Bureau the power it had, where the money was going, and why. The Mirabito critics wondered why this was the business of a State Representative. If Rick did not like the legislation which set up this system of spending government money, why didn’t he just propose some new legislation in Harrisburg? Why didn’t Rick go to meetings and attempt to discuss this in a small town gentlemanly way with the movers and shakers at the Chamber? It is not my purpose to try to answer any of these questions or to be an

advocate for anyone. I am simply interested in how politics work and who gets bitten by crossing the wrong line in the sand.

Vince Matteo, both publicly and privately, in the Williamsport Sun-Gazette, the Webb Weekly, and in emails had made very clear that he did not like Rick Mirabito and wanted to see him defeated. Rick made it equally clear that he did not like the way the Visitor's Bureau was funded or accounted to the public, and the contenders were set for the boxing match. The election became Matteo versus Mirabito.

A deeper, perhaps legal issue, is whether an organization like the Chamber of Commerce should have its Executive Director wage a campaign against an elected official. What do the taxpayers of Lycoming County think about the Executive Director of the Chamber of Commerce so directly going after a politician that he does not like? Is that simply informing the public through the good offices of a well-respected nonprofit organization? Is it bad form for the Executive Director of the Chamber to initiate a war against a political official with whom he has personal and professional baggage?

There is nothing new about an incumbent getting tossed out on his ear because he has made powerful people mad. That is the way politics works, and I do not feel sorry for Rick Mirabito or any other politician who faces the wrath of the people because his positions and views have alienated a portion of his voting base. As my father, may his soul rest in peace, would have advised: "He who lives by the sword dies by the sword."

A deeper question for the public is what they want in a Representative and how they would like their officials to behave. Vince Matteo should be congratulated for rallying his members and their friends to a cause he was passionate about. Networking for political purposes is older than our Republic. Rick Mirabito is to be equally congratulated for standing on his principles, regardless of the effect on his electoral status. Both men are strong personalities. I know this because, on more than one occasion, I tried to play the part of the peacemaker together with the good offices of Dave Troisi, of the Williamsport Sun-Gazette. Unfortunately, our efforts were unavailing and the question is whether the people were properly served by the feud which Dave and I could not tamp down.

The answer to these difficult questions is that Matteo may have overstepped the proper role of Executive Director of the Chamber, and Rick may have been too unwilling to try to work through the differences the two men had. The public would have been better served by a clear understanding of what the Visitor's Bureau is, how it was created, who governs it, where the money comes from and where it goes. The Matteo forces say that they have tried to do that, and Mirabito denies their protests of goodwill. The voters have decided, at least in part, that they sided with Matteo, but I have a feeling that the last chapter in the question concerning the Visitor's Bureau is not yet over.

The lesson to be learned from this public bloodletting is the importance of the individual getting involved in the government. We should all know what is going on, why, and the roles being taken by our various public and nonprofit officials. The hotel tax

money is our money, and regardless of who we ultimately agree with, we should stay informed.

Perhaps those who read this column and are interested in public events will provide guidance to our elected and nonelected officialdom.

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