

A Lobbyist with Integrity

A lobbyist with integrity sounds like an oxymoron. Tom Previc was just such a man. Tom was the longtime Democratic lobbyist on behalf of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association, now known as the Pennsylvania Association for Justice. I do not know much about Tom's background before he came to the Trial Lawyers, but I do know a lot about him thereafter.

As I rose the ladder to the presidency of the Trial Lawyers, Tom became a friend, an ever-present guide and something of a mentor. Tom far excelled any knowledge I could possibly have of the political system. He is a virtual encyclopedia of political stories, political histories and "yes," even political intrigue in Harrisburg. Want to know something about a politician's background, positions, weaknesses, strengths, relationships and, well, other things probably indelicate to mention in print, ask Tom; he knows it all.

Tom Previc was not, however, merely a political functionary. He became a friend to everyone, even people he may not have liked, although I think there were probably very few of those. Tom Previc was one of the unique people who seemed to like everybody and everybody I knew liked him.

I spent many years going to meetings in the office of various legislators under the wing and with the thoughtful tutelage of Tom Previc. For most of his career, he served the minority. The Democrats were typically not in power in either the Pennsylvania House or Senate. A lesser man than Tom Previc may therefore have slipped into oblivion. However, not so Tom. He continued to serve as a valuable resource, educator and lobbyist for the positions that he and his employer espoused.

In a world of confused politics, blatant corruption and a lack of integrity, Tom Previc stood out as a shining light of total decency. I remember one particular occasion when I was an incoming president of the Trial Lawyers, President-Elect, standing on the balcony outside the House chambers before a vote on a Bill to eliminate successor liability for asbestos claims. We, the Trial Lawyers, had very little support against the enactment of this law which would cut off compensation to asbestos claimants in an arbitrary and capricious manner. One of the votes in our favor was from a Philadelphia House member. She told me in front of a number of lobbyists and Tom that she was changing her mind and that she would be voting for the Bill eliminating successor liability. When I naively asked her why, she said that she had received "WAM" from the "other side" of the political aisle to help pay campaign debts. I said to her: "Isn't that illegal in Pennsylvania?" She replied: "The railroads have been doing it since 1838." Needless to say, this set off a tremendous reaction among the lobbyists and others present that was almost scary. Tom brought a sense of quietude to what was almost a melee, reminding me of my earlier prediction that the law would be held unconstitutional which, in time, it was so declared.

On another occasion, Tom Previc came to a minor league baseball game in Williamsport, just because I casually invited him. I did not even expect to see him there. There was Tom Previc in the crowd, simply because he loved baseball and he told me that he would make the trip. That was just the kind of decent guy that Tom Previc was.

Many people around the state have similar stories of Tom traveling up to their geography, visiting local politicians and simply being a resource of information, support and warmth during the good times and the bad times. Tom had an uplifting and positive way, no matter what the election results.

With the passage of time, I became an advice-giver as well. Whether what I had to say was meaningless or meaningful, Tom treated it as though it were words of Torah. One time I observed to Tom that the left and the right were so extreme, that they met somewhere in the back. When both left and right, for their own nefarious reasons, supported removing a helmet requirement for motorcycle riders, Tom called me to say that I had been correct in my analysis.

When we would lobby legislators together, I developed a mantra that Tom picked up on. I always asked: "What are the reasons for this Bill? What is the evil or the problem that this Bill is intended to address?" Tom thought that a good theme and began to ask the same questions himself. What about the language in this Bill is necessary? Why are we affecting the rights of consumers, when there is not a particular problem to be addressed but rather only a narrow political policy to be served?

On one occasion when I was in Harrisburg, I remember Tom offering to take my daughter to the Natural History Museum, just to keep her busy and quiet, while I attended to Trial Lawyers business in Harrisburg. The kid loved it, thought Tom was her buddy, and today she is a lawyer.

Even up to the present when a political question of judgment arises, I do not hesitate to call Tom. He still the best resource, the most thoughtful lobbyist I know and an understanding compatriot, friend, Chavir.

We will miss Tom Previc not only because of the excellence of his thinking, the sincerity of his personality and his very high skill set, but also because he represents a non-political kind of politician. People like Tom Previc are hard to find these days. He is the kind of fellow who can get along with people he does not like, and there are not many people that he can find to dislike.

A personal anecdote about Tom says it all for me. I hope he will not mind my repeating this. Tom has been not only a loyal to his mother, but also an honorable son-in-law. Both his mother and his mother-in-law live with Tom and his wife in their elder years. There are very few people who would take on the responsibility that Tom did during such a difficult period in the lives of loved ones. It shows the measure of the man.

Some of the lesser-known folks around the state will also miss Tom Previc. The North Central Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers PAC is the second oldest lawyer's PAC in the state. It has been around for something like 30 years. Never was a contribution made without a phone call to Tom Previc to make sure that the funds given by the local PAC were consistent with the state organization and consumer-oriented goals in general.

Perhaps the most fun that Tom and I had over the years were visiting politicians together locally and in Harrisburg to discuss legislation. Tom knew of my background working in the federal courts and later working for Henry Hager "Merc," President Pro Tempore of the State Senate during a very productive time period. Because Tom knew of my role in the drafting of some legislation that we still work with today, I became a resource; Tom's draftsperson. Sometimes I would almost be overwhelmed with the amount of work that Tom, Mark Phenicie and other colleagues had to face. Nevertheless, I always took the position of trying to draft something simple, understandable, and that would effectuate good for the consumers in Pennsylvania and victims of harm. Of course, I could never have done it without the input of Tom Previc. Whether the work was good or not, Tom took it seriously, was grateful and had helpful suggestions to offer.

It is not an understatement to say that Tom Previc is a man without measure whose contribution to the Trial Lawyers and the consumers in Pennsylvania cannot be understated. He will be sorely missed. We can only hope for a future at the Trial Lawyers dominated by Titanic positive figures like Tom Previc.

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