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The Man From Elroy

Joel Rogers | January 29, 2001

To a degree that's hard to appreciate outside Wisconsin, Tommy Thompson's impending move to Washington to become Secretary of Health and Human Services will transform this state's politics. Now entering his fifteenth year as governor, Thompson has for so long and so completely dominated our political life that we are used to mapping its history in Steinbergian epochs. There is Old Wisconsin, a receding green landscape where one can still glimpse the tiny figures of Fighting Bob La Follette, Father Groppi, Gaylord Nelson and the circling ghost of Joe McCarthy. And then there is Today's Wisconsin, an eternal, life-sized present, physically more akin to northern New Jersey and better known as "Tommy's Place." That yet another political world will soon come into view has us more than confused. We are dazed with hope. We even seem to be breathing differently.

But enough about us. What can we tell you about our "man from Elroy," the tiny farming town, deep in our coldest sticks, that is Thompson's lifelong home and the place he long represented in the State Assembly?

First, don't underestimate him. Before becoming governor, Thompson's twenty-year career in the State Assembly was distinguished only by painstaking party hacking and strident but ineffective advocacy of then still unfashionable right-wing views. Among liberals, his election as governor was greeted as a brief hiccup in state politics largely attributable to a Rustbelt recession that still resisted sleep here. Thompson was thought to be nasty but a rube, sufficiently at odds with the state's centrist political culture to be transient in his power.

Boy, were they wrong. Upon taking office, Thompson moved immediately to tighten his control of the state apparatus, overrunning Wisconsin's traditionally independent civil service with a small army of intensely loyal and openly political appointees. He patronized continuously and at scale, afterward tapping a river of corporate cash to float easily from one landslide re-election to the next. And he simply rolled legislative Democrats, stabbing them to death with his magic veto pen. Wisconsin grants its governors the unusual power to strike not just line items but individual words and numbers, and to reduce any proposed expenditure. Used infrequently before Thompson, the power in theory makes legislative budgets the equivalent of phone books, ready for gubernatorial cut and paste. Thompson made theory practice, boldly invoking the power some 2,000 times to shape law in his own image, and not once was he overridden. Make no mistake about it--the rube ruled.

Second, don't box him ideologically. Thompson signed one of the nation's most punitive late-term abortion bans (later overturned, with many others, by the US Supreme Court) and is on record as believing that abortion should be criminalized except where necessary to save a woman's life, or in cases of rape or incest. But he's also strongly defended stem-cell researchers (who use extracted embryo cells) at the state university and worked with Madison's liberal US Representative Tammy Baldwin, who happens to be an open lesbian, on women's healthcare concerns.

He has crusaded ceaselessly against welfare recipients, eventually gaining national renown by time-limiting their eligibility for support. (This Wisconsin "miracle" is hardly that. It achieved massive reductions in welfare caseloads by simply losing track of former recipients or dissolving them in a sea of working poor.) But he's also been quicker than other welfare "reformers" to help those once on welfare rolls with expanded childcare assistance and health insurance, and extended those benefits to many others. He killed light rail in Milwaukee and is a god for the state's highway lobby. His most enduring legacy, indeed, won't be welfare reform but sprawl. However, as chairman of Amtrak, he's also recently promoted high-speed rail in the Midwest. As anti-union as the next Republican, he's supported joint labor-management efforts at worker training and job retention. And so on. Always happy to throw big bloody chunks of red meat to the right, Thompson makes deals with others, too. His only limit: "if business does not object."

Third, watch out. Thompson's intelligence and near-feral sense of power, along with his longstanding ties to the Bush family, samurai devotion to the Republican Party and close attention to political detail (not to mention his polished self-caricature as a happy Babbitt from the heartland, brimming with confidence and good cheer interrupted only by occasional tearful confessions of how much he loves public service, or the lightning decapitation of a political opponent) make him a formidable political force. Add in several hundred billion dollars in HHS programs and tens of thousands of lines of amendable administrative program code, and you have something worth worrying seriously about.

Worth emphasizing here is that Thompson is not another half-cocked James Watt. By nature--and despite his Zeus-like reign in Wisconsin--he is a team player who treasures political discipline. But as a political pro, he seldom shows his hand before he plays it, and it is seldom possible to predict just what that play will be. You can only rest uneasy that whatever it is it will come at you full-bore. Prudence recommends both a readiness to respond in kind and more than the usual openness to the possibility of tactical alliance.

Good luck, America.