

Debate Illustrates Respect for Retiring House Member

Written by Rich Miller
Sunday, 15 April 2012 05:17

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Retiring state Representative Joe Lyons (D-Chicago) said a debate on the House floor last month was his “finest hour.” He was probably right.

Lyons successfully fought off five hostile floor amendments to his bill requiring that women seeking abortions be offered a look at an ultrasound test before having an abortion. The proposal has been a matter of much contention for the past three years, and it came to a head again in late March.

Last year, after two years of failing to pass the House Human Services Committee, the ultrasound bill was assigned to the infinitely more conservative House Agriculture Committee, a move that enraged pro-choice advocates. The pro-choicers vehemently protested the assignment, claiming that “women are not livestock,” and were able to stop the legislation on the House floor with a flurry of parliamentary moves.

Lyons is a member of Democratic leadership, so he took sponsorship of the bill this year to help give the effort some muscle. The measure was once again assigned to the Ag Committee, where it was again approved. This time, the pro-choice opponents filed several hostile amendments, one requiring patients with erectile problems to view a video of a painful pharmaceutical side effect. Those amendments were assigned to the House Human Services Committee and were approved earlier last month and sent to the floor.

When the amendments were called to the floor for a vote, Lyons claimed that House

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Democratic leadership, which controls the Rules Committee, had deliberately shepherded the hostile amendments through the process. “If the Rules Committee will do this to me as a fellow member of leadership,” Lyons said, “think what they’ll do to you if the will is there to try to hurt one of your bills and sabotage it, sabotage it in the Rules Committee.”

Lyons was applauded by the chamber several times during his speeches against the hostile amendments. After Representative Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago) said that if the bill had been sent to “an appropriate committee and addressed in a dignified manner,” her amendment wouldn’t have been needed, Representative Jim Watson (R-Jacksonville) rose to Lyons’ defense. “There is no more dignified member of this chamber than Joe Lyons,” Watson insisted to roars of approval, “and for somebody to take this opportunity to try to slight him is a little out-of-hand.” Feigenholtz’s amendment was soundly defeated, 36-66.

Representative Kelly Cassidy (D-Chicago) rose next to explain her amendment, which changed the bill’s title to the “Ultrasound & Erectile Dysfunction Information Opportunity Act.” After seeing what happened in the previous debate, Cassidy made sure to give respect to Lyons right up-front, but said it was “profoundly insulting” that Lyons’ bill was assigned to the House Ag Committee. Lyons pointed out that the bill had gone nowhere in the Human Services Committee, and claimed the opinion of Ag Committee members was “just as valid as any other committee.” Cassidy’s amendment received a mere 32 votes.

Republican Representative David Harris rose to speak against Democrat Naomi Jakobsson’s amendment, pointing out the faulty logic of Jakobsson blaming the Democrat-controlled House Rules Committee for assigning Lyons’ bill to the Agriculture Committee while she benefited from the Rules Committee’s assignment of her hostile amendment to the far more liberal Human Services Committee. Jakobsson’s amendment received just 37 votes. Two more hostile amendments sponsored by two more Democratic legislators went down in flames after that.

When the *Chicago Sun-Times* still endorsed candidates, the editors would ask my opinion of legislators. Lyons had a general election in 2010, and the editorial board seemed bent on supporting his opponent. But when we got to Lyons’ race, I told them that they were looking at Lyons too much from outside appearances as a run-of-the-mill Chicago political hack.

Lyons, however, had become one of the most respected members of the House. Legislators of both parties recognize the great reverence he shows the chamber and the individuals in it. There is, I said, no more beloved figure in the Illinois House than Joe Lyons. Republicans will

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loudly chant “We want Joe!” if whoever is sitting in the speaker’s chair acts less than evenhanded. They know Lyons always tries to be fair when he’s in that chair. The paper endorsed him, and that’s also why so many of his colleagues sided with him during those debates.

Lyons’ retirement is going to be a huge loss for the House. Whatever you think of his stance on the issues, I’m here to tell you it’ll be impossible to replace him.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com.