

# FISCAL AWARENESS SERVICE

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DR. GERALD FAVERMAN, Chairman of the Board

## A LETTER OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY

July 18, 1986

TO: FISCAL AWARENESS SERVICE Subscribers

FROM: Gerald A. Faverman and Bev Farrar

SUBJECT: A DISCUSSION WITH COLLEEN ENGLER, CANDIDATE FOR GOVERNOR

*This letter looks at Colleen Engler, candidate for the Republican gubernatorial nomination. It reviews her background and comments on her fortunes in the present campaign, but it is primarily a picture of Engler as she sees herself, based on a recent interview with Public Sector Consultants, Inc.*

In 1974, Republican Colleen House won a seat in the Michigan House in a special election labeled "unwinnable"--she was unknown, 22 years old, and faced with an established opponent in a Bay County Democratic district. Today Colleen House Engler is confronted with a primary election at least as unwinnable--she is widely unknown and vastly underfunded. None of these obstacles to electability restrain a number of knowledgeable people from declaring her the best Republican candidate for governor and the one who would be most effective in challenging Blanchard on the issues.

Representative Engler is one of the most dynamic speakers among the Republican candidates, and she projects a very firm grasp of the state issues with which a governor must deal. However, she has been unable to raise the money to publicize her positions on television where it counts. In a statewide election, there is every reason to believe this lack of exposure constitutes an unsurmountable barrier.

At the age of 22, Colleen House was serving in the state legislature. The special election that thrust her into politics occurred in Bay County in June 1974. Informed by the local Republican party that "a name" would be put on the ballot, that no campaigning would be done, and that the seat was not winnable, she volunteered to run. "Perhaps I was a little naive," she says. "I had the idealistic feeling that people should be given a real choice in an election."

In the general election the following November, she was elected to a full term in the House; but two years later, in a campaign she calls "brutal," Democratic candidate James Barcia defeated her. In 1975, Representative House married then Representative John Engler, who is now Senate Majority Leader. She says her marriage was used by her opponent in a negative and sexist campaign that belied the Democrats' reputation for support of women's rights.

After her defeat, Engler served as manager of public affairs for the Michigan State Chamber of Commerce until 1980 when she became Michigan campaign director for George Bush. In 1982, she was elected to a state House

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seat for the newly created 99th district (Isabella and Mecosta counties) and in 1984, she was reelected, albeit by a razor-thin margin. Engler serves on the House Taxation, Labor, and Constitutional Revision and Women's Rights committees.

Representative Engler believes that experience in state government is a significant issue in this election. She says Blanchard's lack of experience at the state level shows in the way he works or fails to work with the state legislature. "He's not very effective in dealing with [us] and hesitant about doing it." She claims Blanchard arrived in Lansing with an attitude that likened the comparative stature of Congress versus the state legislature to that of Winston Churchill versus Don Knotts and that his attitude has not changed. In contrast, she believes "the best and brightest in politics today go into state government. That's where all the action is going on right now."

Engler is among those Republicans who are obviously partisan and pro Reagan. The governor's "comeback state" rhetoric, she says, is a matter of taking credit where none is due. "I did more to improve Michigan's economy in one single action than Blanchard has done in three years in office," she says. "I voted for Ronald Reagan." The lion's share of the comeback in Michigan can be attributed to the national trend toward improvement, she says. "We've had no major business initiatives passed in the state legislature since Blanchard was elected." Of the changes made in workers' compensation, Representative Engler asserts the system had deteriorated so much under Blanchard's appointments to the Workers' Compensation Appeal Board that the entire system had to be scrapped and started over again. Even those initiatives, she says, came from the legislature, not the executive branch. The significant changes in workers' compensation put through in 1982, she adds, can be credited entirely to former Governor William Milliken.

Engler does concede that Blanchard can be credited with effecting a change in atmosphere in Michigan, a "feel good" climate that is a necessary predecessor to business improvement.

She believes Michigan can have a business climate second to none in the country, but it will take very effective reforms in labor law and an end to the pervasive impression that labor dominates the state. An added opportunity is presented by business and industry's discovery that water is needed for industrial growth, she says, noting that the Sunbelt states that recently looked so irresistible simply don't have an adequate water supply for the future.

Engler sees tourism as a potential "world class industry" for Michigan, going well beyond its current regional appeal. Improvements in air travel, she believes, will dramatically change where people vacation. A market for Michigan among northern Europeans will be quite feasible, she says, with the increase in leisure time accentuating the potential both here and abroad. She favors consideration of a department of tourism in state government to replace the current "splintering" of tourism concerns among the departments of Commerce, Natural Resources, and Transportation. Greater investment in Michigan would follow such an emphasis, she says, citing the possibility of developing a large ski resort in the Upper Peninsula along the lines of those in Colorado to bring big money and increased employment to the area.

In education, Engler believes Michigan should be looking for excellence, not growth. She stresses the need to encourage research facilities and

concentrate more in selected areas and "would like to see every four-year college or university in Michigan nationally recognized in at least one of their programs." She thinks that federal funding cuts, as well as the constraints of state funding, may force Michigan to decide exactly what programs and possibly what institutions it will continue to fund. Such decisions, she concedes, would be very difficult politically but within the realm of possibility given carefully thought-out incentives to staff and students.

Federal cutbacks are inevitable, Representative Engler believes, because "we cannot handle the deficit like we've been handling it forever. I think what we'll see in the future is scaled down participation with the states." And for Michigan in particular, she predicts the population shift to the South and Southwest will weaken the state's clout at the national level. "Programs important to aging industrial states will not have the votes to sustain them. That's when Michigan will have to make some tough decisions," she says. "It would help to have a governor who can get along well with the southern and southwestern congressional people in the future and who shares more of their philosophy of government, which is not a lot of government growth." As much as Governor Blanchard portrays himself as a conservative, she says, "I really don't believe he is a conservative. It's just public relations."

Engler believes much more must be done to encourage development in the cities in place of the current policy of giving "everyone everywhere" a tax abatement for development. As it is, she says, businesses that will locate in a certain area regardless of incentives receive a tax abatement, infuriating the businesses already located there. "It's not a good policy. If we revise our labor laws to make ourselves more competitive with other states, we're still going to have businesses locating in suburban Oakland County for example--they like Oakland County without a tax abatement. Tax abatements should be used for truly distressed areas.

"I also think we should start bulldozing in the cities," she says, excepting historical buildings. "Areas that are not worth saving should come down and we must do whatever we can to make the cities a nice place. I support enterprise zones and will be anxious to see how that works in Benton Harbor. [Engler refers to recent legislation establishing an enterprise zone in that city.] She also thinks the recent move by MSU's School of Urban Affairs to "adopt" Benton Harbor offers an interesting and innovative approach to helping cities, one of several fresh perspectives that can be brought to bear on urban problems.

"I believe the people who live in Detroit [for example] like Detroit and want it to be a good place to live and feel good about their area. In the future, it's going to be more and more important for people out-state to have a reason to like Detroit, to have hope for Detroit, to support Detroit. Detroit is going to be losing seats [in the legislature] and the power will shift to out-state Michigan." These new voters will need to see an active attitude of self-help in the cities when state assistance is requested, she says. "If there's no effort, if all we see are higher costs for municipal services and higher wages for employees, the cities will be cut off."

A top priority for Michigan and for the people who live here, Engler says, is the environment. Among the elements that would bring improvement in this area is a Department of Natural Resources "that's not as schizophrenic as it's been in the past," she says. Regarding toxic control, she sees a role for the federal government in terms of Superfund money, but believes federal

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funding for state problems overall will be cut back further in the future unless federal taxes are raised--an unlikely eventuality, she says.

Crime in Michigan has "peaked out," she believes, "because our population is aging." For that reason, "we have to be careful not to overbuild the prison system. Right now, it's a big thing, and we do need regional prisons. But it's important for us not to overlook our county jail system and, in many cases, use the county jails to house people from the local community. They can do it cheaper than the State can. I'd like to see the state helping local counties do that," she says. Engler does not favor capital punishment.

While Engler exudes assurance when speaking of issues, she is clearly frustrated by a harsh reality of campaigning for statewide office--the need for money. "I've discovered that no longer can you just be a candidate for governor and try to win the race by organization and ability," she says. "You do not become a credible candidate until you are on television with paid advertising. There's something magic about that. If you appear packaged in someone's living room for 30 seconds, you gain credibility as a candidate. The media themselves foster this. You're not perceived as being a 'real' candidate" until you have the money for paid advertising. Yet "in this particular race, [the media] have even shown that there's quite a difference between what someone is on television and what he really is."

In contrast, Engler says her strengths surface at public appearances as soon as she is heard with other candidates. "There is some skepticism until they've heard me," she says, at which point "they say, 'Gee, you really know what you're talking about.'"

Engler accepts the fact that she is judged differently from male candidates. They are allowed both to avoid the issues, she says, and to know little about them. Further, she must be as Caesar's wife in her personal life, while male candidates need not be above reproach.

The bright spot in her campaign has occurred where she has centered her career--in the state legislature. "My colleagues have been very supportive even without my asking," she says. "When you serve with people, you hope for their confidence in your ability for leadership because they really know you better than anyone else." And among those who know her, she is taken seriously as a candidate. House Republican Minority Leader Michael Busch says Colleen Engler has "the best credentials and the best ability."

Engler firmly believes she could beat the governor in November, but of her opponents, she says, "If they think they can beat Blanchard in the fall, they should be talking about issues right now and about what their strengths are." Currently [in July], they're operating under the Walter Mondale syndrome, she says, telling people how bad things are. "You've got to tell them how you'll make things better."

She wishes all Republicans would ask themselves which candidate would have the momentum to defeat Blanchard after the primary. "My candidacy would be the only one with the impetus to go on and defeat a strong incumbent," she asserts. Imagine the headline, she says. "For any other primary candidate, it will be 'He did it by climbing over dead bodies' or 'He barely hung on and did it' or 'He did it with endorsements by fringe groups.' But with my election, it would be 'How did she do it?' Not a bad impetus to be taking to a general election." Republicans, she believes, would rally around a nominee who won against all odds because the odds are even heavier in the general election.

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It's an interesting point, but like all her points, it's not one that voters are able to hear from an underdog with a minuscule budget.

As Representative Engler struggles for a voice in the big money arena of statewide politics, she may well settle for an ancient comfort--to all things there is a season. This may not be Engler's season, but there is little question that her season will come.