

Michigan COMMENTARY

State Senator Richard Posthumus: A Profile

by David Kimball, Senior Consultant for Public Policy

At age 40 Senator Dick Posthumus regularly is heralded as one of the brightest stars of Michigan's Republican Party. His star still is rising: The election that just gave Posthumus his third Senate term also propelled his close, longtime friend John Engler to the governorship, and in the Senate Republican caucus last week Posthumus won the majority leader's post, a position formerly held by Engler.

Respected by his colleagues and widely considered a born politician with uncanny tactical instincts, Posthumus is unassumingly self-confident and wears an easy smile on a youthful, untroubled countenance. He credits much of this interpersonal ease to the fact that he punctuates his time at the capitol with the daily commute to his Alto (near Grand Rapids) home where he grows cash crops on a 600-acre family farm.

"You can get so deeply into politics that everything else becomes secondary and family life tends to be destroyed," he says. "When I first decided to run I made a commitment that I was not going to let that happen—that my family was going to come first no matter what. One of the ways I accomplish that is by going home every night." Although Posthumus occasionally stays in Lansing after a late session, these exceptions are relatively rare. "When I get home, there are four kids running around hollering, and all of a sudden I'm back to reality. There's no lobbyist taking me out to dinner telling me what a great legislator I am."

"I can honestly say," he muses, "that I could walk away from this job tomorrow—not without some feeling of loss—but with no regret. I know that the most important things to me are there at home, and I could find another job where I would be at least as happy. I know this from the bottom of my heart."

That sense of unshakable perspective and commitment to family values—a Posthumus hallmark—flows from his childhood; he grew up in a large Dutch family on his grandfather's dairy farm near Grand Rapids. Each of his parents had six siblings, and reunions were a weekly event. "We'd spend Sunday morning at church with my mother's family, and in the afternoon my dad's family would all be at the farm," he recalls.

Posthumus credits his religious convictions with helping spawn his highly regarded people skills. "I've gone to the same church since I was born," he says, "and I think my sensitivity toward people developed partly as a result of our church and partly as a result of my mother and father. Even though we're a very conservative family, there's always been a strong sensitivity toward other people and their problems."

"You know," he adds, "there probably aren't many legislators today who went to a one-room schoolhouse. That had an impact on me. Sometimes things get so large that you think one person can't make a difference; when you go to a one-room schoolhouse, you know that everybody has an impact."

Throughout childhood, Posthumus's fascination with farming vied with an emerging interest in politics and government. As high school class president and valedictorian, he considered majoring in political science at Michigan State University and then continuing to law school. His love for the land won out, however, and he enrolled instead as an agricultural economics major. Serendipitously, that program's curriculum at MSU was very oriented toward public administration; in fact, the title of his degree program subsequently was changed to public affairs management.

Another happy coincidence placed him in the same dormitory with fellow agricultural economics major John Engler, and the two became friends. In the summer after Posthumus's sophomore year Engler described his plans to run for the state legislature and asked for his classmate's help. "Every morning I'd

get up and do chores, then I'd drive up to Mt. Pleasant, work on the campaign all day, and come home to do chores at night. It was fun," Posthumus recalls. It also was victorious: In a prophetic outcome, neophyte and underdog John Engler defeated a 14-year incumbent by 159 votes. "In this win by a very small margin, I saw once again how much difference a single individual could make," Posthumus reflects. "That really excited me, and that's probably what got me hooked on politics."

The following year, while still an undergraduate, Posthumus ran for—and captured—the newly created post of third vice-chair of the state Republican Party. In the days of the "youth power" movement and a lowered age of majority, both political parties were aggressively recruiting young voters, and the state GOP targeted the vice-chairmanship for someone under age 25. In becoming the first person to hold the post, Posthumus edged out a number of other up-and-coming young Republicans—including current state party chair Spencer Abraham (by one vote).

While in college, Posthumus's thrifty habits—"I guess it's the old conservative Dutch heritage"—enabled him to buy a small Lansing house as an investment. Upon graduating from MSU in 1972, Posthumus married childhood sweetheart Pamela Bartz and sold the property, and the couple purchased their first farm. Soon thereafter, friend and fellow farmer Jack Welborn won a seat in the state House and needed someone to manage his office. Pam took the job and worked for Welborn for a decade, serving as first as secretary and then as aide. Posthumus notes that his wife's experience in state government has been a great boon to their relationship over the course of his own career.

For six years after college, Posthumus worked for agricultural trade associations, representing Michigan's sugar beet and beef interests to the legislature and the U.S. Congress. Then, in 1979, he accepted a job as director of constituent relations for the Michigan House Republicans. This experience was to become a key factor in forming the "insider's" perspective for which Posthumus has become so noted: "I got a close look at the good and the bad of the legislature, insight into how things really happen around here, and a practical, working knowledge of government. I also made some strong friendships that last to this day. Many people now in the Senate were in the House then—Dan DeGrow, Doug Cruce, and Fred Dillingham, for example."

In 1982 Posthumus made a pair of difficult political decisions. The first was agreeing to run then-Senator Jack Welborn's gubernatorial campaign. Posthumus remembers: "It was difficult deciding to give up a safe job to work on the campaign." Six months later, with Welborn's candidacy flagging in a crowded field, the Senate seat in Posthumus's district fell vacant, and Posthumus concluded that he should leave the Welborn campaign to mount his own race for the Senate. Leaving Welborn's campaign midway, muses Posthumus, "certainly wasn't due to the candidate or to the other people involved with the campaign—it was due more to circumstances. It was a difficult decision: Jack had been a friend for a long time, but I felt that there weren't enough people with a conservative background in the legislature, and this was an opportunity to have an impact on that."

Posthumus won the seat in traditionally Republican Kent and Ottawa counties, and at the end of his first term confronted another difficult political choice. He was co-chair of Michigan's Jack Kemp for President campaign, but he eventually broke with the state's Kemp-Robertson coalition and formed a new Kemp-Bush coalition, taking with him a majority of Michigan's Kemp delegates; many felt that Posthumus had deserted the cause. In supporting what some saw as an overly pragmatic decision, Posthumus told a Grand Rapids newspaper: "Sometimes the art of politics is the art of negotiating. Kemp got more delegates here than he did anywhere else. I wouldn't call that caving in. We've got to go on to the next election. That's all part of how the system operates."

His keen understanding of how the legislative system operates contributed to his swift rise to leadership positions on two key Senate committees: Commerce and Technology, which Posthumus chairs, and Economic Development, where he is vice-chair. His economics background, his experience as a farmer and businessman, and his personal political philosophy combine to provide Posthumus with a very focussed viewpoint on economic development and commerce issues.

"As we look to the '90s," he predicts, "knowledge is going to be the key to the future of Michigan's economy. Historically, our economy has been based on roughly equal inputs of labor, land or natural resources, and capital. But I think the most important input now is information—knowledge—because

the productivity of all other inputs depends on how much knowledge you have. I think we've made a mistake by spending a lot of time targeting what looks like a winning industry and then providing capital to businesses in that industry. I don't think that leads to productivity, because capital is no longer the most important economic input—knowledge is.

"I think the most important role we need to play—in cooperation with consortia of businesses—is to provide knowledge so the best entrepreneurs—not just the ones that government picks—can use their knowledge to rise to the top. I think that there's not going to be an inadequacy of capital or an inadequacy of labor; any entrepreneur will be able to get them. It's being able to get the knowledge and using it to make the best use of capital and labor—that's the way we'll be the most productive."

As Posthumus outlines his political vision, it is impossible to miss the enthusiastic conviction in his voice. "To me," he reiterates, "knowledge is the key to improving the job climate in Michigan. It's also the key to helping the urban poor get out of the ghetto. At one point, all we needed to do was provide welfare to unskilled people until they could get work in the factories; then they could become middle class virtually overnight. That's not an option for nearly as many people in our society today. Education is the key, and, as a state issue, education clearly must be our top priority.

"We have to deal with the [education] equity problem. The gap between the rich and the poor continues to get wider; if we don't deal with this in the legislature, the courts will. And we have to deal with quality. I think the most important aspect of quality—and I know this sounds old-fashioned—is family involvement. Martin Luther King once said that society's greatest educational tool is the family. I think that holds true whether you're in the city, a rural area, or the suburbs. I've argued that rather than force children to go to a specific school, parents ought to have the option of sending them to any number of public schools. Some argue for this because it creates competition and incentives within the school system—and I think this is a beneficial and important sidelight. But I think its most important attribute is that it forces parents to make a decision; when you have to make a decision it forces you to become more knowledgeable."

As the new Senate majority leader, Posthumus sees the issues of education reform and economic development as central to the Republican legislative agenda. He stresses the importance he places on long-range planning, explaining: "It's so easy in the legislature to just respond to short-term issues; I want us to have a long-term vision too, so that even while we're dealing with short-run problems—property taxes, for example, may be shorter term—we're continually moving toward a larger vision over the next four years."

When asked if he may have any surprises for his Senate colleagues as their new majority leader, he replies: "I think people may be a little surprised by my vision. I've been in the position of facilitator, not concept leader, and I think that people may not see this side of me. I try to play the role I'm given to play and do it well, but I've never had to lead on vision, and I think people may be surprised."

Asked to name the legislative accomplishments of which he is most proud, Posthumus unhesitatingly points to 1989 enabling legislation allowing communities to create metropolitan councils and to his role in revising in the state's banking statutes. He is equally quick to identify his chief legislative disappointment: "Not being able to reduce the property tax. We have the fourth-highest property tax in the country, and our legislature and the administration have just stalemated. A number of citizen-initiated proposals also all have failed."

Of his old friend and classmate, Governor-elect Engler, Posthumus offered an anecdote in a pre-election interview: "I know John better than anybody, and those people writing him off are making a big mistake. All I remember is that in 1978 he was running against an incumbent, and everybody said that he was running too far behind and never could win. He just worked and worked and worked. And he won."

Although he has been mentioned as a possible future gubernatorial candidate, Posthumus says he is not looking past his present job in the legislature. "I haven't looked that far ahead, haven't set those goals yet," he reports matter-of-factly, adding that he probably will continue farming and might investigate a post-legislative career with international affairs dimensions in the private sector.

Meanwhile, he keeps a resolute grasp not only on his policy agenda but also on his personal perspective. "I don't golf," he explains; "instead, I go sit on a tractor and think. It helps. I enjoy it, and it brings me

back to reality; you see what people really have to do to earn a living. It's easy to lose track of that when you get down here to the capitol—it's sort of a false world in a sense. But two years ago parts of this state had the worst drought of the century, and I'd get up every morning seeing the corn wilt and have that gut-wrenching feeling—the feeling that not just farmers get but every laborer and every small businessperson get when business goes bad. Those kinds of experiences are important; they give me a better understanding of what we need to do in the legislature.”

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