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# THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE

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*a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left*

*March 2021*

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## Wages, water, and weed

The great minds of the Iowa Democratic Party are busily engaged in post mortem debate following the debacle of 2020.

Our paid professionals have an array of excuses at hand: the pandemic prevented personal contact, the derecho depressed turnout, the Republican Party sued the election commissioners of our bluest counties, polling failed to foresee a surge of Trump-energized voters.

Some strategists blame the influence of Fox News and the nationalization of issues. Most of this year's odious legislative initiatives in Iowa were generated by ALEC, not by Iowa voters: near-elimination of early voting, a one-week waiting period to receive unemployment benefits, reinstatement of state executions, removal of gender identity as a protected class in the state civil rights code, ad nauseum. None of these proposals were campaign issues. All of them are on the national Republican agenda. Outside the state Capitol, few Iowans have asked for them.



Then there are the consultants who believe that Democratic candidates lacked a meaningful, appealing message. Hatred of Trump clearly wasn't enough. Nor was fighting the opioid epidemic, expanding gun-owner background checks, or getting dark money out of politics.

The Prairie Progressive weighs in on the side of messaging. We propose a platform for progressive candidates to push in 2022: **The Three Ws**.

**Wages.** Before its identity became muddled, the Democratic Party won elections as the champion of the working class. Raising the minimum wage should be a no-brainer as a top priority for a winning campaign. It polls well in all age groups, it is just and moral, and it supports efforts to attract entrepreneurs and tech companies to Iowa. All those highly-skilled and well-educated managerial types the state hopes to attract will need a decently-paid workforce to support them. Among our increasing embarrassments is the fact that a state as regressive as South Dakota has a higher minimum wage indexed to inflation. A winning candidate would also talk about wage theft and wages without benefits for thousands of hard-working Iowans.

**Water.** Also a no-brainer. Iowans voted to improve the state's water quality but didn't provide the money to do it. Our state's regulatory system is

no match for the Iowa Farm Bureau's refusal to hold polluters accountable. Nothing says Don't Move to Iowa like an unprotected environment and underfunded public health programs. How about an ad showing parents and their kid fishing in a sparkling stream? An honest nutrient reduction strategy, with penalties for those who benefit from government policies that exploit our natural resources, is a tall order but a popular platform.

**Weed.** Wildly popular in every demographic. A recent national Vox poll showed 62% of all voters favor legalization, which would bring in revenue, create jobs, and alleviate the racial disparities of the so-called war on drugs. Opioid addiction, the even more damaging epidemic of alcoholism, and PTSD symptoms would decrease, even under moderate decriminalization. Iowa's brand as a welcoming state would improve. Having only a barely-functional medical marijuana program has solidified our status as a poor place to locate a business, and a cruel place for families experiencing epilepsy, glaucoma, AIDS, dementia, chronic pain, nausea, or multiple sclerosis.

**The Three Ws** would create excitement, address the economy, focus on the environment, promote social justice, and are easy to remember. Something for the great minds to consider.

—*Prairie Dog*

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# The King is Dead

Mercifully, Rush Limbaugh no longer occupies the nation's publicly owned airwaves. Death was the only thing that could stop him. Iowa's eight commercial stations that broadcast Rush will most likely fill in with another propagandist to complete their wall of conservative talk programming – although it wouldn't surprise me if they just go with Limbaugh best-ofs forever.

But let there be no doubt, the king is dead, and this is a positive development on the side of Democracy as it scratches and claws its way back to life after narrowly escaping being killed off by the Trump years. And still could be.

I remember the first time I had a conversation with someone about Rush Limbaugh. I remember it because I found it disturbing although I did not know why at the time. Later I understood that in that moment I had intuitively grasped impending danger, something gone very wrong. A friend told me that while he disagreed with everything Rush said, he enjoyed listening to his program because Rush was so outrageous. He said he found it fascinating that there was always a kernel of "truth" behind the verbiage. He assured me though, that he realized it was all garbage.

Still I was shaken. If an ordinary person could enjoy listening to the likes of Rush Limbaugh, what were the societal implications? This was back in the 90's and most people who even knew of Limbaugh believed him to be harmless. Like wife beaters in small towns, everyone assumes he's a good guy who would never do real harm. Until he kills her, then everyone is mystified. The parallel to "why didn't she just leave?" is "if you don't like Rush just change the channel." But it's not that simple.

The post-mortems I've seen on Rush Limbaugh range from glorification on the right to "he had nothing better to do but complain" on the left. At least conservatives are in reality about what Rush actually did for them, while the rest of the country naively sees him as merely a hateful radio personality, acting alone, like a lone wolf serial killer or mass shooter.

The idea that Rush was an aberration, that he was successful because of his talent and that the country was hungry for what he had to offer, is absolutely false. As with Fox News, a following had to be created. It took money, time and commitment. It was the beginning of the right-wing media infrastructure.

**Hate speech  
started to be profitable.**

Noam Chomsky famously said, "Whoever controls the media controls the minds of the public." Rush was one of the most important players in the right-wing take-over of the American mind which is how he came to be the king of talk radio. Politicians began bowing to Rush because constituents were falling prey to the propaganda. Eventually, Rush was the guy Republicans in Congress answered to. Rush was widely credited with killing immigration reform in 2007 by tagging the DREAM Act an "amnesty bill for illegal immigrants."

But Rush didn't achieve this stunning success on his own, and the public was not demanding more hate speech. Far from it. Media mogul and Republican operative Roger Ailes foisted Rush onto the national scene after he had worked in small radio stations for twenty years.

Without Ailes' help, Limbaugh would probably never have been a thing. They kept him on the air long enough to effectively brainwash a large swath of listeners. Hate speech started to become profitable. Then corporate ownership had an excuse to develop more conservative talk programs that were imposed on local radio stations particularly in rural areas. In the end, Limbaugh occupied 600 radio stations. It was the medium's version of McDonalds springing up on every corner, driving out competition. Suddenly, there was nothing but right-wing talk on the AM airwaves—all under the guise that it was harmless entertainment.

Much has been exposed about the purposeful rise of right-wing media in America. The Lewis Powell Memo of 1971 to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, dubbed "a blueprint for corporate domination of American democracy," laid out the plan. Movement conservatives needed their own media because they saw regular news as not on the side of the free enterprise system. The demise of the Fairness Doctrine and relaxation of corporate ownership rules followed. The right built a structural imbalance in the media that has everything to do with getting us to the current level of crazy that we are experiencing now.

Today right-wing propaganda dominates every media format. It will have to be dealt with because democracy is unsustainable without an informed citizenry. Rush Limbaugh was a unifying symbol and inspirational leader of the right-wing forces that are bent on the destruction of democracy. Movements need their leaders. Without Rush they are weaker.

*—Trish Nelson is the editor of  
BlogforIowa.com*

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# People in your neighborhood

**A**lmost two years later, residents in manufactured home parks are still fighting for the same protections we began fighting for during the legislation session of 2019.

In March of 2019, residents in mobile home parks recently bought by Havenpark, like the one I live in in North Liberty, were notified of new ownership – and new rents that in some places were about to jump by as much as 60%. Soon we discovered similar stories across the state in dozens of parks owned by a variety of different owners. We discovered that out-of-state owners are attracted to Iowa in part because of woefully outdated and very weak state laws that provide few resident protections and allow predatory investors to take advantage of Iowa's most vulnerable residents. After an unsuccessful attempt to change state laws in 2019, we organized in our individual parks and with other parks. A bipartisan bill showed real promise in 2020, until Iowa House and Senate leaders told committee chairs to drop the bill from their agendas. But we were not finished.

We encouraged our state legislators to join residents in a forum this past January 5th. Many did. We have been able to hear from residents of manufactured home parks across the state. This is not an issue that is being abused by one owner, but rather by several out-of-state corporations and private equity groups that target states with lenient or no laws to protect residents. They buy up these properties and raise the rent exorbitantly, creating a high profit margin for them and their investors.

I told Senators and Representatives that were able to join us for the forum that my neighborhood is just like their neighborhood. I know these people. The man next door that was

born with no hands and no feet, the retired veteran who travels through the community on his motorized wheelchair, the young families with young children who gather at the end of the street to shoot basketball on a summer evening, and – like me – my retired neighbors. Our community is made up of these people. Just like people in your neighborhood.

We tell our stories, and along the way, our cities, counties, our hometown businesses, and our churches become part of our fight. We pick up allies as we make people aware. They see us as people worthy of rights that we have earned. We develop solutions for our shared struggles. Our stories ensure that people know us, and call us neighbors. They see us as productive members of our community. Some days the work is discouraging, but our stories are evidence that we've tried, even if the legislation doesn't go anywhere.

Most residents in a manufactured home park, have purchased and own their own homes. These are manufactured homes, and in some cases it is either too expensive to move them or they cannot be moved.

Our once affordable housing communities are fast becoming a place we do not recognize. They are becoming anything but “affordable” as well.

We are asking lawmakers for rent protection. No limit exists on the amount of an increase and the only limit on the frequency is a 60-day notice, which could result in several increases in a one-year period.

The second thing we have asked of our legislators is to put into law a “good cause eviction” standard. Owners must be required to show good cause before evicting a

resident. These standards must be consistent and enforced across the state.

Residents are asking for fair and reasonable fees, and that fees should be tied to a good cause so the fee system is not abused by park owners to circumvent the rent protections or to target particular families for eviction. These limits must be set statewide.

The state must require a lease that spells out the park owner's responsibilities to maintain a clean and safe park and prohibit abusive lease provisions. It is imperative that the state adopt a clear, effective mechanism for enforcing these guidelines and requiring owners to remove illegal provisions from the lease.

To prevent a mass displacement of low-income Iowans and destruction of affordable housing stock, local residents must be offered first right to purchase when their communities are up for sale. Current owners should be barred from evicting residents for a period long enough to allow residents to pursue local ownership. And if the residents are forced to move as a last resort, owners profiting from the sale of the park must be required to provide significant relocation assistance.

*—Candi Evans is Vice-President of the Golfview Residents Association in North Liberty*

[Editor's note: The Iowa Manufactured Housing Association PAC is the only lobbyist registered against HF 442, which would require 180 days' notice for rent increases at mobile home parks and require park owners to have good cause to evict a tenant. The owner of Golfview, Anthony Antonelli, contributed \$50,000 to this PAC last August. The following month, the PAC gave \$30,000 to State Sen. Pat Grassley.]

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# Slaying the Cains of this world

In 1995, Iowa was one of only twelve states and the District of Columbia in which there was no death penalty statute. That same year, Virginia executed five people. Today, Virginia is in the process of abolishing the death penalty.

Meanwhile, Iowa and West Virginia, both states that have abolished capital punishment in the same year—1965—are the only two states this year that have considered reinstating the death penalty. No one wants to live in a state that is going backwards, but the facts are evident. There are twenty-two states without a death penalty. That is an increase of ten states over a twenty-five-year period that have abolished the death penalty as the ultimate punishment. In that 10-year period, not one state has reinstated capital punishment.

We cannot eradicate heinous murder. Homicide was one of the first stories in the Bible, if you believe Cain slayed Abel. However, even God did not avenge the death of Abel by killing Cain. He left him to wander in no man's land with a mark that warned anyone of trying to harm Cain with damage coming to them "sevenfold."

The ability of the government to thrust death upon the guilty is about as archaic as any law. Congress and the states have sanitized the death penalty by eliminating horrific methods of slaying the Cains of this world. The guillotine is considered unusual and cruel, but lethal injection is not? Death is death. Why not stab the guilty murderer with lances and sword? Or, better yet, throw the guilty person into an arena with hungry lions. There are so many unused sports arenas right now. The blood-thirsty citizens of the state could cheer on the underdog.

Like most solutions offered by vote-seeking legislators, the answer is in the end. The end is often more costly than the preventative option. But the methods of prevention are dull. The results are not visual or concrete. Killing the bastard is exciting. As we often said in the mid-1990s during Iowa's biggest threat of reinstatement since abolition: Violence begets violence! Were we not paying attention to what we were saying? That's exactly what the proponents wanted—violence.

A death row must be built from scratch. It cannot be a part of the present prison, and it cannot wait until it has a resident. The cost of a separate steel structure is estimated

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today to be well over \$13 million. That cost does not include the cost to the state's Public Defender, the courts, or the county in which the defendant will be tried. That county will absorb a huge cost, as witnessed by Nebraska's Richardson County (two different capital murders), or Missouri's Schuyler County (executed Andrew Six of Ottumwa for killing a woman 'after' bringing her across state lines from Iowa – no death penalty—to Missouri), both bordering Iowa.

The simple deranged minds of the Iowans who support capital punishment cannot comprehend how close they are to crossing over the fine line into the mind of the accused. It's a thought process that cannot be distinguished beyond what's good or what's bad. The result must be the same—death.

People kill in the heat of passion, while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, because they have a presumption that they will not be caught, or in the state of an active mental illness or poor mental health. Lawmakers, no matter how hard they try, cannot fit a deterrence argument into any of those categories.

Proponents of the death penalty believe that the law would be applied equally throughout the state. The choice to charge a defendant with capital murder is borne solely with the county attorney. John Sarcone in Polk County is an adamant opponent of the death penalty. Contrarily, there are several county attorneys in Iowa who would love the attention as the first one to try a defendant in the county courthouse.

Since the most serious threat of reinstatement in 1995, the scope of the bills has been narrowed. Today, pro-capital punishment legislators are claiming that the bill they introduced is a very limited bill that will rarely be used. This is an ancient legislative trick. First, get the core of the law enacted. After that, enhancement of the penalty is as easy as adding four words (i.e., and law enforcement officers).

Politicians who want to solve the problem of crime by executing perpetrators are moving us backwards. Those statespersons who look for solutions to prevent violent crime are the true heroes.

—Marty Ryan is President of  
*Iowans Against the Death Penalty*

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# Looking on in horror

In Iowa, a legislature under one-party control has become an endless affliction. Of late, its leadership is obsessed with grinding out an unsavory statutory sausage comprised of the freedom to carry guns without permits, voting restrictions, removal of local authority from counties and cities, and enforced “free speech” rights. [In Iowa, free speech is increasingly defined as any entity’s inability to prohibit speech such as Holocaust denial, anti-LGBTQ rants, and frank racism in its many guises. Oh, let’s not forget treason, à la former traitor-in-chief Donald J. Trump and his GOP enablers].

I know I risk losing people at the outset by citing the GOP directly, but what else is one to do? I have conservative friends of long standing. They support many facets of what I now call “old school” GOP thought that I oppose. Their positions in the party have been completely submerged. The old school is being eviscerated and erased by cultic hordes of Trump’s brainwashed and permanently-aggrieved supporters, elected and civilian. There’s no place for a rational Republican anymore. They are being systematically crushed, and they are leaving the party. It is in no way “partisan rhetoric” to plainly say so.

In recent days, legislators have moved to limit private enterprise in an addled defense of right-wing “freedom of speech.” They propose a law that actually penalizes local governments doing business with any tech company restricting lies, racism, and treason on any of its platforms. It is a once-unimaginable stretch of legislative authority, and it targets a bastion of GOP support. If passed, this bill will go a long way towards making Iowa America’s

first Stalinist state. That’s a little something to tell the grandkids, no?

Iowa’s legislature is also moving to ban tenure at state universities, pass a “bathroom bill” targeting trans Iowans, and ban county Auditors from sending absentee ballot requests to all citizens of a county, with criminal penalties (they prefer a process of requesting ballots, with deadlines they are shifting to create smaller windows of opportunity for a legitimate vote to be successfully cast and counted).

Lest you think these are the hysterical characterizations of a libtard having a fit, take a look at how Iowa’s business and academic communities are responding to the attention Iowa is receiving for these bills. Hint: You know things are bad when your legislature proposes a bill that becomes known as the “anti-tech bill.”

In the current *Business Record*, a Des Moines publication whose tag line is “Helping Business do Business Better,” a major piece is devoted to this flurry of GOP-sponsored bills that are “not welcoming.” It says the bills are already having a devastating effect on efforts to attract business to the state. And they have examples.

Rick Sanders is president and director of the Iowa State University Research Park. He told the Record ISU has been knocked out of contention on three potential projects they were feeling good about. “Three weeks ago we felt we were right there; now all three have dropped us,” he said. “And two of them were bold enough to tell us one of the primary reasons they dropped us is what’s going on at the Capitol right now.” He went on to note companies interested in Iowa

pointed to a similar attempt to restrict restroom use by trans residents in North Carolina. You may recall that did not end well for the Tar Heel state.

Another Iowa booster, Dave Tucker, described in *Business Record* as partner in a Des Moines-based venture capital firm and a board member of the Technology Association of Iowa, is also open in stating how such bills are eroding his ability to promote Iowa’s brand.

“Companies that I talk to outside of Iowa wonder what we’re thinking,” he says. “One company we were talking to, trying to convince them to come to Iowa, saw the bathroom bill and said, ‘What the heck are you thinking? Didn’t you see what happened in North Carolina when they tried to pass this bill?’ And they questioned if Iowa was really the right place.”

All over the state, business and entrepreneurial leaders are sharing similar stories. Major calls to discuss potential opportunities for the state turn into joke sessions at Iowa’s expense – all based on recent headlines coming out of Des Moines.

Iowa’s GOP is subjecting the state to the most brutal realities of the free marketplace they have long adored. The market simply will not bear the garbage they are trying to force into law. The market itself is rejecting the GOP’s right wing. By unhappy extension, the state of Iowa itself is being rejected. Our governor, a GOP toady to the radicalized right, is unlikely to exert any pressure on the legislature to stem this harmful tide. Iowa’s “old school” Republicans, business leaders, and all the rest of us, for now, can only look on in horror.

—*Kim Painter is the Johnson County Recorder*

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# An uncharitable elegy

When I heard Rush Limbaugh died at the age of 70, short of the average male lifespan, my first thought was, “Great, that’s a few years less for him to spew his poisonous thoughts all over America and embarrass us around the world.”

Rush’s celebration of the white working man changed my thinking. When I imagine his audience, I see men zealously guarding the “rights” they gain from white male privilege, looking down on anyone not like them—Femi-Nazis, for example.

Then I think of the hard-working women I have known. My mother, first of all, who worked three jobs to support us after my father died. When I was six and went to school full days, she took a job as receptionist in a surgeon’s office, which allowed her to leave for work after she got me off to school in the mornings. That way, I was only alone for a couple of hours after school before she got home at 5:15. When that didn’t pay the bills, she took in sewing, making draperies, slip covers, prom dresses, dance costumes and wedding clothes. It was work she could do after I was in bed in the evening. She didn’t sleep much. When the rent went up, her last resort was waitressing in my uncle’s restaurant. It gave her sister a day off from waitressing, but she watched me while my mom worked. When they both were working, I sat in the back booth and read comic books between short stints of helping with small tasks in the restaurant. We never had much money, but I felt safe and loved.

I think of the hard-working people of color I have known. Picking strawberries in the spring, detasseling corn in the summer, harvesting tomatoes at the Campbell

Soup farm just south of town. We knew they were even worse off than we were, and my mom helped them in small ways whenever she could.

We knew immigrant families who struggled. Men who had well-paying jobs in their home countries but were forced to do menial labor because of their lack of English, and women who hadn’t worked outside their homes before, who were cleaning houses and offices. My mom helped them as well.

Rush changed my thinking. Now I feel tethered to his image of white men.

Before Rush, I would have also thought of all the hard-working white men I have known. Sure, they enjoyed white privilege, union membership, better pay and other perks not open to us, but they gave good work for the money they were paid and supported their families. They lived on our block, and I saw them at church as ushers and deacons, at home washing their cars and listening to the Cubs game on Saturday afternoons, and in our home when they came to fix the plumbing. I saw them as workers and knew they hadn’t asked for the special treatment they received as white males. They were my uncles and cousins and neighbors. When their wives and sisters joined unions and got better pay, they were glad for them.

Some people needed help. My mom got Social Security Survivors Benefits for me until I was 18. The family down the block got a monthly SS disability check after their father was totally disabled in an accident at the electric company. There was no stigma to that. I never felt as if anyone looked down on us for the benefits we received. Rather, I saw how people respected

my mom for working so hard. We respected the family with the disabled father who had extended family members living in their house and everyone contributed.

Taking my mom’s lead, I have always been in favor of equal wages for women, and for better benefits for families who need help. Over the years, I formed more political ideas about the need for reforms in government policies across the board. But, before Rush, I didn’t think of “equal” as “taking away” from white men. I hoped for a general raising of benefits for everyone and a better nation for us all. I paid more for fair-trade products, and I didn’t feel personally harmed when my taxes went up.

Rush had predecessors who started the movement, but few did so much to divide America. Just as White Privilege keeps the least-well-off of us, white or not, from forming beneficial alliances, this division takes away our ability to see that there are those have, and those who need. It’s difficult to move from “need” to “have,” but also quite possible to move from “have” to “need.” A death, loss of a job, disability—catastrophes are out there waiting to happen. The current pandemic proves that we are always at the mercy of unexpected events. Working together, we can help each other. When we think of white men as victims, instead of thinking of who can help and who needs help, we travel the downward path of worrying that someone else is getting more.

I’m glad Rush is gone. I hope his absence from the airwaves, the former president’s absence from Twitter, and a man in the White House who wants to be a healer, will bring us at least a step closer to helping each other.

—Carol Thompson lives in Coralville

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# I fear for our state

I have survived the first half of the Iowa legislative session. It has been an incredible experience so far – and I mean that in every sense of the term. It has been incredible in that it has been an exciting and amazing experience for me personally. It has also been incredible in the sense that I literally cannot believe what I’m seeing.

By all accounts, the pandemic has fundamentally changed the experience. According to colleagues who have been around a long time, the session calendar is usually bursting with dinners, receptions, and other social events. By contrast, I am in my hotel room every night eating food I brought from home.

But the truth is, I wouldn’t have time for social activities. This session, the Republican majority is fast-tracking a huge number of bills. With only 41 total members in the Democratic caucus, minus several who are not at the Capitol due to COVID, each of us carries a heavy load. I spend every night working. I research every bill I get. I read the part of the Iowa Code where it would go to understand the legal context. I read any related Iowa court cases. I research other states’ laws to see whether the proposed bill is typical or an outlier. I look at which lobbying groups are for and against. I call state officials at the agencies that will be charged with enforcement. I talk to leaders and officials in my district to see what they think and how the district will be affected. It’s a lot of work.

I love it.

But while I love what I am doing, I do not love what the majority party is doing. It has been a disheartening session. To begin with, the process is not good deliberative democracy. In fact, it’s pretty awful.

The subcommittee meeting is supposed to be the opportunity for public input, but many members of the public do not feel comfortable coming to the Capitol during the pandemic, especially when there is no mask mandate and no requirement to report or track COVID cases. Some lobbyists do show up, but many of them have told me they are so afraid of retaliation by the Republican leadership that they don’t want to say what they really think about a bill. Also, the Democrats are good at raising issues during subcommittee, but even when the Republicans acknowledge problems with bills, they sign off on them anyway to keep them moving quickly. The same thing happens on a larger scale during

When do I fight and when do I get along?

committee. And floor debate isn’t debate at all. Many bills are “non-con,” or non-controversial, so little debate is needed. But even on the controversial issues, the Republicans don’t debate. Except for the floor manager, they typically sit there silently. When I half-jokingly chided one of the Republicans for not debating, he replied simply, “they won’t let us.”

The result has been one terrible bill after another: a constitutional amendment to eliminate the fundamental right to abortion under any circumstances; an extreme constitutional gun rights amendment that threatens many of our existing common-sense gun safety laws; inadequate and discriminatory funding of our public schools; punitive micromanaging of our universities; and a vindictive

election bill that is a slash-and-burn of our voting freedoms. In sum, the Republicans are catering to the extreme-right members of their party and enacting an angry, grievance-ridden agenda.

As a member of the minority party, I wrestle with one thing every single day: when do I fight and when do I get along? My strategy so far has been to choose my battles. I try to get along on those bills where there might be room for negotiation. I believe that my legal training and due diligence has made some of this legislation better.

On the more extreme bills, I have gone all out and pulled no punches. I know it is unlikely that I will change the vote. But to paraphrase Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, dissent is for a future age. When I speak in committee or on the floor, I am not just speaking to others in the room. I am speaking to future voters. I believe the Republicans are overplaying their hand and have become too extreme for Iowa. If I can show people that, I can help to bring about the change we need.

Even with my freshman enthusiasm, it is hard not to feel discouraged by what is happening in the legislature. Like many others, I fear for our state. Iowans need and deserve better. But I do believe we can bring things right again. And if we can, we must. I have never been more committed to anything.

—Christina Bohannon is the State Representative for Iowa House District 85

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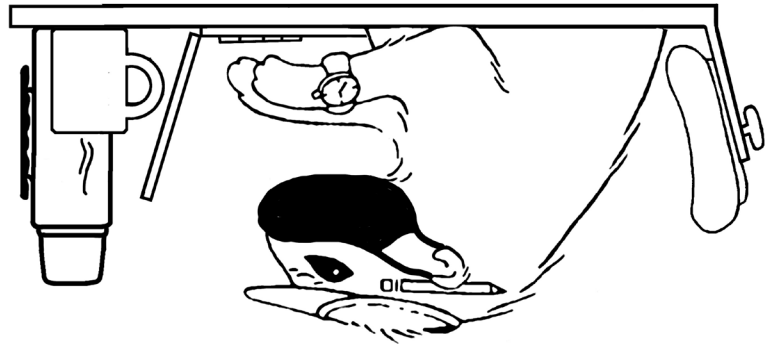
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