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Ottawa*Watch* 269: Keith Martin and political memory

By Lloyd Mackey

Keith Martin is a good example of the ways in which politicians will move back and forth along the ideological spectrum from time to time. Some do it pragmatically, others on principle. Martin, I believe, acted mainly on principle.

He left federal politics not long after I wrote this piece. Since then, he has been active on global health issues, often working with United Nations agencies.

Sometimes, a little political memory helps to make sense of an issue that has bounced around from pillar to post.

Such has been the case of the maternal and child care initiative that Prime Minister Stephen Harper has identified as a “signature” item. When he takes the chair in a few weeks at the Canadian-hosted G-8 summit in the Muskoka, it will be a major focus.

In a moment, Keith Martin’s name will come into this conversation.

The maternal/child care initiative began life in a fairly simple and straightforward manner. In his now-famous Davos speech, Harper pointed out that half a million women die needlessly in childbirth, each year, in less developed nations and thousands of children die before the age of five. Harper proposed that the G-8 nations take on the provision of clean water and other basic life-preserving needs, to help bring an effective resolution to this continuing catastrophe.

Soon, however, as a result of some wedge political strategy emerging in opposition caucuses, this simple initiative turned into a potentially divisive dustup.

The rest of the story is pretty well known, by now. The Liberals proposed a motion urging that all forms of family planning be included in the G-8 initiative and that “Bush ideology” be excluded. The Bush toss-off referred to former American president George Bush’s reluctance to fund abortion, either at home or abroad.

Knowing that an unknown but substantial number of Liberals would vote against their own party’s motion, the Conservatives determined to oppose it. Their instincts were correct. The motion failed by a handful of votes. Three pro-life Liberals had voted against their own party. If they had supported it, there would have been a tied vote, with the Speaker breaking the tie.

In an ironic twist for this writer, the New Democrats issued a press release decrying the “anti-choice” Liberals who helped defeat the motion, singling out John McKay for some slightly-less-than-subtle ridicule.

Part of their “evidence” against McKay was a piece that I had written for www.canadianchristianity.com about how Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff has assigned McKay to help rebuild bridges between evangelical Christians and the Liberal party. In that story, I referred to McKay’s having told Ignatieff that he could not agree with a party strategy that would, in effect, pit pro-lifers and abortion-on-demand types against each other. His argument, quietly put, was that you don’t win over evangelical voters by thumbing noses in their faces.

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Enter Keith Martin.

After the flack around the failed Liberal vote died down, Martin, a Vancouver Island Liberal MP and physician, suggested a “compromise”. He proposed that, at the G-8, Harper could lead the various nations to adopt phases of the maternal/child care initiative that might fit into their own international development policies.

There are two points worth noting about Martin’s intervention.

- In fact, Harper was already well along toward working out that sort of arrangement. It was relatively easy to do, given that each of the eight nations involved are sovereign, and have the right to contribute to the initiative in a way that works for them. Working collaboratively, at which he has, on the domestic level, become quite adept, the prime minister could nicely achieve the original objectives of the initiative. Martin, if anything, should get full credit for reflecting agreement for what Harper was already working out.
- For this point, we call up some political memory. Martin, some will recall, was one of the original “class of ‘93” Reform Party caucus. A fiscal conservative and social liberal, he was one of the leadership contenders when Reform morphed into the Canadian Alliance later in that decade. He ran fourth. When the Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives merged to form the Conservative Party of Canada, he decided not to stay in the new party. He sat as an independent for a while, then moved to the Liberals, where he has been ever since.

The point to be made, in understanding all this, is that Martin never really changed his political stripes. On health issues, where he is most expert, he encourages privatization. On life issues, he is pro-choice but would stop well short of advocating abortion on demand.

One other thing: Martin will point out, when appropriate, that he periodically writes on social policy for liberal Catholic publications. He is inclined to encourage people of faith to apply that faith in ways that will better society.

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I would cautiously predict that the maternal/child care initiative will turn out well, for two reasons. One is that the prime minister and his foreign policy advisors have timed things well, in choosing to bring the program forward at this G-8. And, the other, is that people like Martin and McKay, on the Liberal side, have stood on principle and proceeded to apply principle in a practical and feasible fashion.

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