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OttawaWatch 103: David Sweet's new role

By Lloyd Mackey

David Sweet has continued to function effectively in the House of Commons, most recently as chair of the Ethics Committee. Ironically, he announced recently that he is not running for Parliament again at the next election, whenever it comes. That announcement came in the wake of reports that he and his wife took a Caribbean winter vacation mid-pandemic.

And Work Research Foundation, which help spur Sweet into federal politics, has grown apace, into the respected faith-based think tank known as Cardus.

David Kilgour, too, has continued to use his foreign policy skills, although outside Parliament. His work on the China file is highly regarded. His research and advocacy with regard to the Chinese government treatment of the Uyghars (Chinese Muslims) in "re-education camps", as well as the Falun Gong, The imprisoned among the latter are alleged to be the victims of organ harvesting for transplant purposes.

When I first got to know David Sweet, he was president of PromiseKeepers Canada, the Christian organization that was – and is – committed to helping men to keep their promises to their spouses, families, churches, communities and nation.

His PromiseKeepers role put Sweet between a rock and a hard place when he began to think about entering federal politics. Because PK made a point of highlighting eloquent and high profile evangelical leaders at its major arena and stadium events – and because its leaders sought out favorable publicity for its ministry, as a means to reach as many men as possible – Sweet was soon tarred with the "fundamentalist" brush.

In 2004, he resigned the PK presidency and ran in the Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough-Westdale riding, a mixed urban-rural area running eastward from the suburbs of Hamilton, Ontario.

Sweet lost the riding by about 3,000 votes but was encouraged by his riding association to run again the next time around. Meanwhile, he became a vice-president of the Work Research Foundation. WRF is a Christian think tank with a rapidly-growing reputation for producing thoughtful briefs, papers and publications tying together an astute public policy awareness with a carefully worked out and optimistic Calvinistic world view.

When he ran in the 2006 election, Sweet won the ADFW riding for the Conservatives by a comfortable margin.

Sweet is a pretty low-keyed member. He can be easily spotted from the press gallery, seated in the back row of the government back benches, his shiny bald pate standing out from the crowd. If he is cabinet material, it has not yet become obvious. But those who knew him at WRF suggest that if he stays the course, he will make the grade in due time.

But, with careful advice from government policy and strategic advisors, Sweet – and other newly-minted MPs of evangelical persuasion – are finding ways to broaden their base and find their sea legs in the House of Commons.

That was why I found it most interesting, a few weeks ago, to sit in on a meeting co-chaired by Sweet and Rabbi Rueben Bulka, the latter as well-known and regarded Jewish leader in the Ottawa area.

The meeting, attended by about a dozen people, was an inter-faith leadership group whose intention was to get to know each other and figure out ways of working together in and around The Hill. Among the attenders were adherents of various Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist and Ba'hai groups, each with promises of being able to bring more religious hues into the cluster

That an avowed evangelical could be chosen to co-chair such a group says something about the quiet long-time influence of former Conservative-cum-Liberal MP David Kilgour. It was Kilgour who, from a conservative Protestant perspective, became very skilled and experienced at bringing together spokespersons of various groups who, under normal circumstances, would not be able to agree on much more than the time of day.

Now, of course, Kilgour is gone from the Commons, having been banished from the Paul Martin cabinet ostensibly for cautiously questioning the headlong rush toward legalizing same gender marriage.

In his banishment, both before and after leaving the Liberal caucus, he chaired a foreign affairs sub-committee on human rights, which enabled him to bring to the fore various kinds of religious persecution taking place throughout the world. He also spoke up – and continues to do so – for the plight of the Falun Gong and the Tibetan Buddhists in China and the Darfurian refugees in Sudan.

We have not heard the last of David Kilgour.

Meanwhile, David Sweet has moved, in a very tentative fashion, into the informal role that Kilgour filled for many years – that of bringing to the fore people who are able and willing to speak into the political process from their perspectives as religious believers.

Make no mistake. There are not many people who are well-equipped to speak into these situations with both integrity and fairness.

David Sweet has a significant role to play in this area and will require considerable wisdom, diplomacy and, at times, forthrightness, if he is to serve effectively.

I will look forward to updating *OttawaWatch* readers from time to time, on how he is doing in this role.

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