

# WI

AUGUST 2013

WISCONSIN INTEREST

# What Young Conservatives Want

BY GEORGE LIGHTBOURN



## MPS' Uninspiring Leader

BY MIKE NICHOLS

## Fear, Loathing and Obamacare

BY MICHAEL FLAHERTY

## First Lady Tonette Walker: Survivor

BY SUNNY SCHUBERT



Editor > CHARLES J. SYKES

## The singular leadership of George Lightbourn

The term “public servant” has been used too generically to retain much of its original significance. But it is impossible to describe George Lightbourn without invoking the concept in its fullest original sense. During both his years in state government and his second career as president of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, George has combined service and leadership.

In particular, he has been instrumental in the resurrection of this magazine, transforming it from a staid (and usually unread) journal into what you have in your hand now. George brought to his duties not only a vast reservoir of knowledge, but also a finely honed, wry humor and preternatural calm amid the storms that have buffeted our state over the past few years. I have been privileged to work with George and have frequently benefitted from his counsel.

George retired from WPRI at the end of June but continues to share that counsel. Our cover story this month is an account of a provocative dinner conversation that George and I had with a group of young conservatives, who candidly expressed their uneasiness with aspects of conservatism and the failure of the Republican Party to connect with younger, more moderate voters. The edited transcript fairly captures the back and forth and, while not all of our readers will share their views, those views are a valuable starting point for further debate.

George has been succeeded as WPRI president by senior fellow Mike Nichols. Mike contributes an incisive critique of the failures of Superintendent Gregory Thornton as leader of the Milwaukee Public Schools.

## WPRI

The Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, Inc., established in 1987, is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit institute working to engage and energize Wisconsinites and others in discussions and timely action on key public policy issues critical to the state’s future, its growth and prosperity. The institute’s research and public education activities are directed to identify and promote public policies in Wisconsin that are fair, accountable and cost effective.

Through original research and analysis and through public opinion polling, the institute’s work will focus on such issue arenas as state and local government tax policy and spending and related program accountability, consequences and effectiveness. It will also focus on health care policy and service delivery; education; transportation and economic development; welfare and social services; and other issues currently or likely to significantly impact the quality of life and future of the state.

The institute is guided by a belief that competitive free markets, limited government, private initiative, and personal responsibility are essential to our democratic way of life.

To find more information regarding The Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, any article in this publication or questions and comments, please go to [www.wpri.org](http://www.wpri.org).

# WI

WISCONSIN INTEREST

**Publisher:**  
Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, Inc.

**Editor:**  
Charles J. Sykes

**Managing Editor:**  
Marc Eisen

**Art Direction:**  
Stephan & Brady, Inc.

**Contributors:**  
Richard Esenberg  
Michael Flaherty  
Warren Kozak  
George Lightbourn  
Mike Nichols  
Christian Schneider  
Sunny Schubert  
Charles J. Sykes

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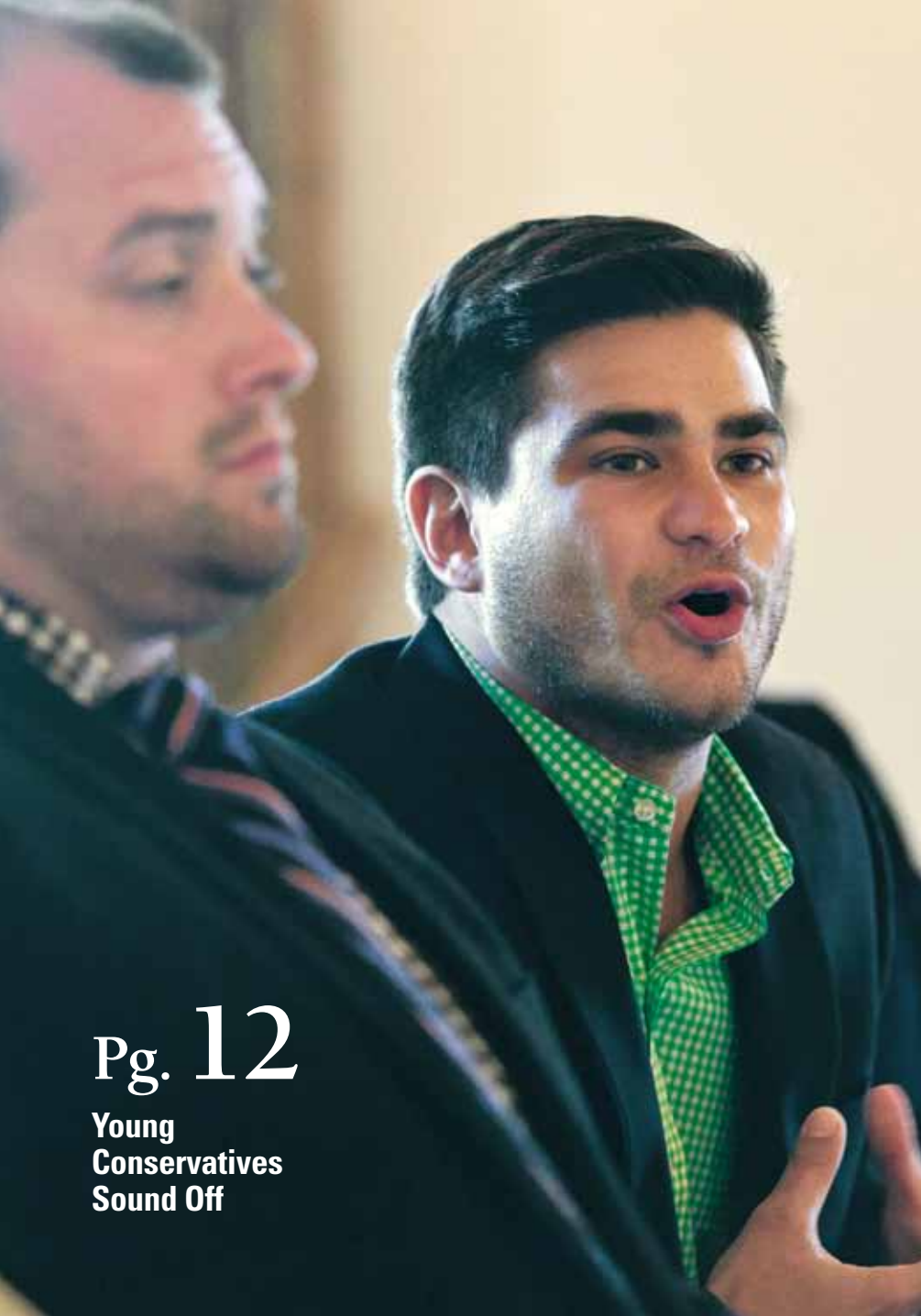
### Contact Information:

**ADDRESS:**  
P.O. Box 382  
Hartland, WI  
53029

**PHONE:**  
262.367.9940

**EMAIL:**  
[wpri@wpri.org](mailto:wpri@wpri.org)

**WEBSITE:**  
[www.wpri.org](http://www.wpri.org)



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## Summertime blues

### Despite the glorious season, things couldn't get much worse for UW leaders, Milwaukee apparatchiks and state Democrats

*"A perfect summer day," James Dent once observed, "is when the sun is shining, the breeze is blowing, the birds are singing and the lawn mower is broken." We concur, although we have to note that we could have used a somewhat less laggard start to the season.*

*Equally underwhelming was the start of President Obama's second term, which found him embroiled by an alphabet soup of scandals, ranging from the IRS and DOJ to NSA and PRISM. Washington's political establishment seemed genuinely gobsmacked that after several years of the administration's demonization of the Tea Party, the federal bureaucracy would actually begin to treat its members like demons.*

*As summer moves into its dog days, we also get closer to the advent of Obamacare, although by mid-summer it was still not clear if the Obama administration could even make a train wreck run on time.*

### A fine UW mess

The legislature staggered through a new state budget, which included a modest expansion of school choice and a biggish tax cut. But it was an *annus horribilis* for the University of Wisconsin System.

After years of pleading poverty and hiking tuition, UW officials were caught stashing more than \$600 million in what certainly looked like a massive slush fund. This led the governor and legislature to slash the U's proposed budget increase and freeze tuition for the biennium.

"I hear the angst," said UW President Kevin Reilly. "I hear the anger."

State Sen. Alberta Darling (R-River Hills), who co-chairs the Joint Finance Committee, suggested that what he should be hearing was the door hitting him on the rear end on the way out. "I can't believe Kevin Reilly is still there," she said.

### Peace offering

Lest anyone think that such harsh language would lead



to a period of humbled introspection among the besieged academics, in June several UW departments co-sponsored something called "Fighting Forward: A Labor and Working Class Summit."

"We need more militarism — a solidarity between low-income people, the working class and unions," declared Dane County Supervisor Heidi Wegleitner.

This was relatively mild compared with the declaration of "M Adams," a member of Take Back the Land and Freedom Inc., who insisted: "I do not think you should be able to buy or sell land. We all own it. We're going to take what is ours, whether you like it or not."

### Loser: Milwaukee

Besides the UW System, the other big losers in the state budget were Milwaukee's political apparatchiks. As "Savvy Pundit" wrote on RightWisconsin.com:

"Milwaukee was not a loser because of any false, media-hyped 'War on Milwaukee.' The Finance Committee was actually plenty generous to the city of Milwaukee. But Milwaukee was a loser because it is now in the position of having to rely completely on the kindness of strangers — outstate Republicans — rather than having any of their own indigenous leadership or clout. Milwaukee's Mayor [Tom] Barrett wasted the bulk of his political capital obsessing on two issues he had little to no chance of winning — streetcar and residency — while not weighing in at all on countless other issues impacting Milwaukee.

"To make matters worse, after losing on his two hobby horse issues, the mayor threw a media temper tantrum that made lawmakers less inclined to help Milwaukee on those other issues where he had a fighter's chance at success. This budget also showed the fallout from the radical liberal takeover of Democrat politics in Milwaukee."

### Wimps?

Despite the statewide expansion of school choice in the new budget, national reviews were decidedly mixed. The *Wall Street Journal* editorial board accused the state GOP of

“wimping out” on the issue.

“School choice ought to be a winner for Republicans who want to appeal to minorities and speak about upward mobility, but too many suburban Republicans are still afraid to challenge the teachers unions. That includes in Wisconsin, where reform Gov. Scott Walker has been forced by his own party to accept only token statewide expansion of a voucher program. ...”

## Papers, please

Critics compared the move to a witch-hunt, but Madison Mayor Paul Soglin made a push to force private contractors doing business with the city to disclose their contributions to political advocacy groups.

“If they’re supplying the city while they’re behaving like the Koch brothers,” he insisted, “it would be good for the public to know it.”

This was apparently too Stalin-isty even for the Madison Common Council, which rejected the plan on an 11-9 vote, although some alders said that Soglin’s proposal didn’t go far enough in purging the politically deviant.

## Our IRS scandal

Speaking of witch-hunts, we learned just how aggressively the Internal Revenue Service was prepared to go after groups with scary sounding words like “patriot,” “Tea Party” and “constitution” in their names.

It’s worth recalling here how much effort local Democrats put into the attacks on conservative, nonprofit groups, including the styling of the chairman of the state party, Mike Tate, who told reporters:

“Well, I think what we have here is a very clear admission from David Koch that he is using and abusing this loophole in IRS code and election law to spend tax-deductible money to the benefit of a candidate. ... We think this is ... worthy of investigating.”

Could this explain the IRS’ interest in the Walker recall? Two groups involved in the Verify the Recall movement experienced delays in receiving their nonprofit status, and the IRS asked at least one other conservative organization in Texas about its relationship with the effort.

Coincidence? We think not.

## Strange bedfellows

Two of Wisconsin’s most prominent conservatives found themselves in unusual political territory this summer. U.S. Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner, author of the Patriot Act, emerged as one of the leading critics of National Security Agency abuses, saying of the government’s gathering of metadata: “If there was Big Brother government, this is it.” Comments like that won Sensenbrenner strange new love from the likes of *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*.

Meanwhile, U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan emerged as a leading advocate of bipartisan immigration reform, which won him brickbats from some on the right who had lionized him only months earlier.

## Walker rising

In our spring edition of these Dispatches, we suggested that Gov. Scott Walker was on a roll, and, indeed, his roll continued into the summer. Writing in *The National Journal*, Beth Reinhard handicapped his presidential aspirations:

“Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker polls near the bottom of would-be presidential contenders. Unlike potential rivals, you won’t find him on the cover of Time magazine or slow-jamming the news with comedian Jimmy Fallon.

“But he’s a conservative Republican who won election in a blue state, survived a brutal recall campaign, and now posts approval ratings over 50 percent. A budget-slashing chief executive and son of a Baptist minister who straddles the fiscal and social conservative camps. A proven fundraiser who has put his thumb in the eye of President Obama and big labor.

“He’s poised to be the sleeper Republican presidential candidate of 2016.”

Meanwhile, Democrats struggled to find a candidate to run against Walker in 2014. Former Sen. Russ Feingold is out; U.S. Rep. Ron Kind is out; Assembly Speaker Peter Barca is burned out. This seems to leave them with former lieutenant governor candidate Mahlon Mitchell and, perhaps, a draft choice to be named later.

Enjoy the four weeks of summer. ■

# My dad at war



Capt. Sidney P. Kozak, behind the wheel of a jeep on March 27, 1945, never talked much about his five years of service to his country.

## Stumbling on a long-ago photo, I saw an America that no longer exists BY WARREN KOZAK

This past Memorial Day, I happened upon a large batch of photographs from World War II posted on *The Atlantic* website. There were hundreds in various categories with titles like “Pearl Harbor,” “The Allied Invasion of Europe” and “The Fall of Imperial Japan.”

Among some of the famous images of the war were many I hadn’t seen before. These were not the iconic

photographs that appeared in *Life* magazine or in newspapers across the country. These were pictures that an editor looked at once before moving on. They were ordinary pictures, almost snapshots of the war.

As I scrolled through the category called “The Fall of Nazi Germany,” I stopped at image number 23. The caption reads: “Men of the American 7th Army pour



## My dad at war

I really can't imagine the tension that must have been ever present in that house. I know they listened to the radio every night. WTMJ was always on, and they got their war news from it. Don't forget, there was no television. All the news came from newspapers, magazines, radio and, of course, letters.

As a way of escape, they would go downtown on a Saturday night to the movies. There were large movie palaces along Wisconsin Avenue. But even there, they were subjected to the real world through the newsreels that came on before each film. Newsreels are forgotten today. But they were the only chance that people had to actually watch events that they read about in the papers or heard about on the radio.

The newsreels came out weekly and always started with music. Then a seasoned announcer narrated everything from the war news to the president's comings and goings and, like today, the lives of celebrities of that era. They always ended on a light



*Pvt. William Kozak (right) was able to visit brother Sidney after being wounded. They hadn't seen each other in two years of war.*

note — some sort of funny or odd feature. And by the way, the war news was very sanitized. There was a conscious effort in Washington to keep up morale on

the home front, and the really bad or disturbing news was kept from the public.

Amazingly, the Hollywood studios and news outlets went along with that directive. I say "amazingly"



**All that my dad ever requested from the government was a flag to be placed on his coffin.**



because it is hard to imagine that sort of compliance today. But as they say, it was a different war and a different time.

Most every family had a member engaged in the war effort.

Instead of an all-volunteer force that protects our country today, the Army, Navy, Air Forces and Marines were made up mostly from the civilian population. Another big difference: Even the powerful families had sons serving. All four of President Franklin Roosevelt's sons were in the military, as were sons of millionaires Joseph P. Kennedy and John D. Rockefeller and a Connecticut banker and later U.S. senator named Prescott Bush, whose son, George, flew off a carrier in the Pacific.

Even movie stars, professional baseball players and congressmen gave up their prestigious jobs to serve. One story that hits close to home: The very popular Milwaukee Mayor Carl Zeidler gave up his office to serve in the Navy and was killed in action in 1942.

The nation's elite along with the very ordinary people like my grandparents were, as they say, all in it together. And I believe that in spite of the hardship, the sacrifice and the terrible loss that so many families suffered, one of the reasons for the nostalgia of that period is the



unified bond that the country felt then and hasn't felt with that intensity since. It was like no other time, with the possible exception of a brief period following the attacks on 9/11.

The all-volunteer military today is perhaps the best we have ever had, but something also is lost when less than 1 percent of the population shares the sacrifice. We've lost the spirit we had in the 1940s.

**I grew up with that greatest generation.** Although I was born well after the war, I knew them as the fathers of my classmates at 53rd Street School in Milwaukee. They were my scoutmaster (Marines — Pacific), my dad and my uncle (Army — Europe) and my favorite teacher at John Marshall High School (second wave on D-Day). None of these men walked with a swagger. They were quiet and modest, and they never talked about the horrors they experienced.

My father was a perfect example. He went to work every day — he was an insurance agent — and he came home every night. He was a very quiet man. I could fish with him for hours on Cedar Lake, and if he said anything, it was usually about fish. I know that after the war, he remained very close with one of the lieutenants, who lived in Florida. (The other lieutenant in the company never made it home.) Like many in that generation, he saw his five years of service as his duty, and he considered it an honor to live in what he always regarded as the greatest country on earth. All that my father ever requested from the

government was a flag to be placed on his coffin.

I posted the picture on Facebook, and a lot of my friends wrote very nice responses. The most moving came from someone who knew my father. My cousin, Lawry Margolis, grew up down the street. He and his brother, Marv, were like older brothers to me, and I

spent as much time in their house as I did in my own. He wrote:

“I was at your folks' house in about 1952 and several guys from his company came by to visit. They traded some stories, but I can tell you they absolutely loved and respected your dad, who was their captain. I got the feeling that they truly believed they were alive and survived the war and Battle of the Bulge because of Capt. Kozak (Uncle Sid to me).”

No, he wasn't Tom Hanks, and he was as ordinary as every other father that I grew up with. They quietly did their duty. They witnessed horrors that they chose to keep to themselves. They came home and figured out some way to make sense of it all. And they seemed happiest being with their

wives and their children. Oh yes, watching the Packers ... and fishing.

Here's to you, Dad! And thanks for the surprise hello on Memorial Day. ■



*The author's parents, Sidney and Gert, during training in South Carolina.*

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*Warren Kozak is the author of *LeMay: The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay* (Regnery 2009) and *Presidential Courage: Three Speeches That Changed America*, an ebook published in 2012.*

**To see *The Atlantic's* World War II photos, go to:  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/infocus/pages/ww2/>**



# The prism of school choice

*Liberals and conservatives see starkly different worlds through it* **BY RICHARD ESENBERG**

The statewide expansion of the school choice program has left its advocates debating whether the apparent compromise of increased voucher amounts, statewide availability and enrollment caps is a glass that is half full or half empty. Opponents think they see a camel about to take over the tent. Which camp you fall into may say a lot about how you view not only the quotidian merits of choice but also the world itself.

Stay with me.

Opponents and advocates can and will volley forever over the merits of choice. The left and, excuse my redundancy, the educational establishment argue that the “evidence is in” — a trite catch phrase that almost always means it is not. They point to raw test data showing no difference in test scores between students at choice schools (lumped together) and students in the Milwaukee Public Schools system. They point out that most choice schools — just like their MPS counterparts — do not have student bodies averaging above proficiency on standardized tests.

They are ready to pronounce our 20-year experiment with choice a “failure.”

Proponents want a more nuanced approach, pointing to a series of evaluations conducted by John Witte and Patrick Wolfe at the University of Arkansas’ School Choice Demonstration Project. Witte and Wolfe did a longitudinal study of comparable groups of choice and MPS students and found that the former outperformed the latter in reading and did about as well in math. They found that choice students are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college. They argue that the competition offered by choice has improved MPS’ performance and that, even when choice schools don’t do better, they do just as well for a lot less money.

Proponents are ready to pronounce our 20-year experiment with choice a “success.”

The back and forth could be continued. I believe that choice proponents have the better of the argument, but I’m after a broader point here.

**In a recent op-ed calling for the end of school choice in Milwaukee, liberal scholar Diane Ravitch ended with a peroration celebrating “many children, one Milwaukee.” In her view, the notion of unity**

or equal regard for all means that there be one educational authority.

How you react to that on an ontological level will probably determine how you feel about school choice. Its truth is not self-evident. We would not, for example, say “many children, one Milwaukee, one church.” We would not think that everyone should go to the same hospital (yet) or belong to the same political party — although our friends at One Wisconsin Now seem to believe that unity implies uniformity when it comes to politics.

In my view, it has never made much sense to compare “choice” schools as a whole with public schools as a whole. The larger point of school choice is to permit a diversity of

approaches and to empower families to choose what is best for their children. To value that requires you to believe at least three things about the world.

First, you have to accept the idea that there is not one way to do things. You must believe that a centralized authority is unlikely to be able to decide what is best for all and that, like markets, educational reform must empower a variety of approaches, trusting that, over time, the best will persist and the weaker fade away.

Second, you have to trust families to make choices; you need to believe that ordinary people can make choices for themselves without paternalistic direction or “nudges” from their “betters.” You have to buy into the idea that educational reform can proceed from the bottom up.

**Finally, you have to know that government** does not do diversity, experimentation and choice very well. It is possible that public schools will embrace a diversity of approaches, but mostly they don’t. Faith-based alternatives are ruled out by constitutional proscription. Collective bargaining — particularly on behalf of collections of school districts’ educators — imposes uniformity in employee relations that hampers a more flexible approach. Public schools tend to be dominated by an educational establishment that defines diversity as human beings who look

different but think in the same way.

Just as this philosophical divide cannot be sidestepped by a cacophony of evaluations, the

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*The debate cannot be reduced to a concern about how school choice ‘diverts resources’ from public schools.*

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debate cannot be reduced to a concern about how school choice “diverts resources” from public schools. There is little reason to think so. Our spending on public education has skyrocketed in Wisconsin and, while the rate of increase has slowed in recent years, inflation-adjusted spending per pupil in our public schools has doubled over the past 25 years.

Charles Krauthammer has said that a liberal doesn’t care what you do as long as it’s mandatory. Like all humor, this is an exaggeration rooted in truth. How much it bothers you may say something about how you regard school choice. ■

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*Richard Esenberg is president of the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty and an adjunct professor of law at Marquette University. He blogs at [sharkandshepherd.blogspot.com](http://sharkandshepherd.blogspot.com)*



# Our dinner with young conservatives

Since the November 2012 election, Republicans have become the party of introspection. With President Obama now well into his second term, the party faithful are wrestling with how to regain their mojo with women and minority voters.

In mid-June, *Wisconsin Interest* editor Charlie Sykes and I sat down with a group

of young conservatives over dinner at the University Club in Milwaukee. We wanted to hear what they had to say about the conservative movement and Republican politics. The U.S. Supreme Court had yet to issue its monumental decisions on gay marriage. In Wisconsin, state Rep. Dale Kooyenga (R-Brookfield) had just



# They have a frank and challenging message for GOP leadership

BY GEORGE LIGHTBOURN

introduced a tax cut. Also in the news was the state Senate's passage of the anti-abortion "ultrasound" bill. Both state actions registered with this group, although in decidedly different ways.

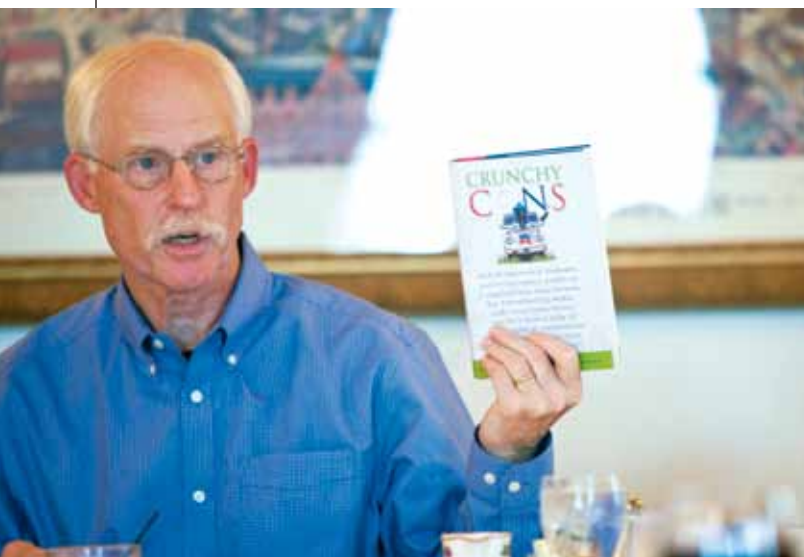
At the end of the evening, we knew we had heard a profound message from 10 thoughtful, committed conservatives who just

happen to be the future of the Republican Party.

Here is an edited version of the evening. To encourage candor, we agreed to not use the last names of the participants. We pick up the conversation about 10 minutes into the meal.

**Lightbourn: Do you feel like you're standing a little bit out of the flow of the conservative mainstream?**

TOM: I think that's the question. You look at right now, in the state budget, for example. There are so many people paying attention to it, and then they throw in this ultrasound stuff, and everyone just says, "All right, I'm out." Is that the



conservative mainstream, or is that the fringe of the mainstream? I'm not sure.

**Sykes: Tell me more about that.**

TOM: Fiscal conservatism is where you get the young people. That's the easy part. Then you go to social issues, and those are just so polarized. Then people just say, "All right, no more politics. Let's just drink."

MIKE: I would say it's the difference between being conservative and Republican.

**Sykes: Why do you say that?**

MIKE: I think most people think conservatively. I'm a conservative. I believe in lower taxes, less government, those sorts of things. I think of it as a philosophy, whereas to become a partisan, it's taking that next step. When you're a partisan, it's easier to have specific positions on social issues.

MOLLY: As far as the social conservatism, I do think that people tend to feel that it's just more personal. They may even agree with you on social issues, but it's just not something you want to be talking about with peers, friends, even sometimes with family.

AMANDA: I completely agree with that. I have a nice group of close friends who I go out with, and I'm probably the only Republican. Financially, they completely side with Republicans, but socially with Democrats. It has a lot to do with the abortion issue and gay marriage.

**Lightbourn: Do you think that they voted Democratic in the last presidential election?**

AMANDA: Definitely.

**Lightbourn: It was the social things?**

AMANDA: Definitely.

**Lightbourn: Do you think that's generally true?**

CARMEN: I believe so.

CHARLES: On the fiscal side, it's easy to get people on board. But when you start getting to the social stuff, that's where it gets really murky, and it's hard to push that personal freedom, personal responsibility. It's hard to say that conservatives are for personal responsibility and for personal freedom and then say that there's an asterisk here

for these certain exceptions.

**JAKE:** We're talking about Dale Kooyenga and the great job he did on the tax cuts. Well, he wrote a really positive message. Democrats tried to paint it as tax cuts for the wealthy. And yet, he said that's because they pay a huge portion of taxes to the state. He had a simple, positive message as opposed to the ultrasound bill. Now [because of the ultrasound bill], every Republican is on his or her heels.

**Sykes: And you're pro-life?**

**JAKE:** Yes.

**UNIDENTIFIED MALE:** I think the sheer politics of it — the timing of it, the messaging of it — is horrible. You have a party that is so vilified by young women and independents that has found the most egregious issue that they don't like, and it's brought up right in the middle of when [Republicans are] doing the greatest things for them. It's bad, bad messaging. I do think it's an albatross for the party.

**Lightbourn: Moving on to another controversial topic, how about the conservative posture on gays? Are we seeing the same kind of tin ear from the party?**

**CARMEN:** Yeah, absolutely. Just here in the Milwaukee area, I know at least a handful of gay business owners who are conservative and by and large support Republican fiscal policies. But they're just so turned off by that [anti-gay] message. These individuals are top, positive contributors to the community. They're paying taxes. They're creating jobs. I think that's a huge



miss. There's got to be a way to bring these folks around.

**Lightbourn: OK, do you consider yourself a conservative?**

**CARMEN:** Yeah.

**Lightbourn: Do you see yourself as an outlier on that issue?**

**CARMEN:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Lightbourn: (to the group) Is he an outlier?**

**KATE:** I don't think he is. If you went around this group, most people are sort of on the younger side and identified as conservative. We have come of age in a generation where we know more people personally who are out or who are going to come out. It strikes me as one of the main missed opportunities to bring people in with the limited government, lower taxes and fiscal conservatism.

**LAURA:** All of us have grown up in an era where it doesn't matter what sexuality you are, because

## Young Conservatives

you've got friends on all sides. One of my best friends is gay, and he's a conservative. He's a normal person. It doesn't matter what he does behind closed doors. It's his business and not mine. He still pays taxes. He still does everything, has all the same ideals that the rest of us have.

JIM: On campus, there are now Republicans, as opposed to when I was there. That's just amazing. They're actually more fervently conservative on fiscal issues and even on some other things. But that [anti-gay issue] is something that isn't there anymore.

CARMEN: It's throttling in that direction, too. I grew up in a very conservative suburb. When I was in high school — which seems like forever ago — [being openly gay] was almost taboo. My younger sister is a senior there, and people are openly gay. It has certainly changed.

has created a nation of moochers. It's one of those things where, for some people, they just see the world as the government taking care of them. It gets to the point where people are so reliant on government, they simply can't pull that safety net out from under them because they know nothing else.

CHARLES: That dependence is creating a voting demographic that will vote to keep that system in place, because if you turn the spigot off, their life will be turned upside-down.

MIKE: We're all human. We cannot turn off that spigot. We cannot walk away and turn our backs. It's a situation that we've all created ourselves, and it was going on long before any of us were here. But taking advantage of the system is the worst part about it. There are individuals who really don't need that help that continue to get it.



**Lightbourn: Is big government something you're concerned about?**

TOM: There's a dependency on government that

**Sykes: Mitt Romney had his 47 percent moment. Was that a disastrous moment in the campaign?**

KATE: It was, but it didn't make him wrong. Just because it was wrong to say it didn't mean he was wrong about the idea behind it. What he said was a disaster, but part of it was true.

**Sykes: Does libertarianism appeal to the younger voters who want smaller government, get-out-of-my-face government, and does that include social issues as well?**

MIKE: It's a new blend. I consider myself a conservative on many fiscal issues, but I understand that there are social issues that need to be addressed. Libertarians say they've figured out at least a formula where they could



bring both sides together, and mainly the young professionals, which is a growing group.

CHARLES: I've had these discussions with political liberals. When I explained the libertarian mantra, without a doubt, every single one of them will nod their head and agree. It's just completely a 180 from those who identify themselves as liberals. They will, without a doubt, say they like the libertarian ideas.

JIM: I think conservatives try to call themselves libertarians because they think that Republicans have lost their way.

KATE: I think that's why libertarians like emphasizing some of the fiscal issues of smaller government. In the Republican Party, we've been running on the Contract with America for 20 years now. It worked in 1994. It's not working in 2012, 2013.

**Lightbourn: That's a good segue. Do you see the Republican Party as stuck in a different era?**

JIM: I think they are stuck in a different era.

TOM: What's unfortunate is that we're kind of in the situation they were in when they had the Contract with America. Now would be an opportune time for a modified version of that. The Contract with America won because of the message. They owned the message. Republicans in Congress are not really unified around one specific issue.

JAKE: The Democrats are very effective at criticizing an extreme [Republican] austerity budget. I think from our perspective, for our generation, what we're looking at is that after decades we need to get the national debt under

control. If we don't do that, we might not have a vibrant enough economy for our kids or even for ourselves.

CHARLES: Again, I think it's simple messaging.



Right now, if you're Paul Ryan, you're just hammering home the message that the federal government is spending a trillion dollars more than it's bringing in. You don't have to be a math major to figure out that that's not sustainable in the long term.

MOLLY: There was that "Life of Julia" ad the Obama campaign used. While it didn't pan out the way they intended, I think you need something like that, something that's not going to be a pie chart, a bar graph. You need something that's more illustrative on a personal level. There just has to be a better way to illustrate that than... I love Paul Ryan but, [face it], he always has a PowerPoint presentation.

**Lightbourn: Last November, did Obama win**

### **the election or did Romney lose?**

JIM: Romney lost.

CHARLES: He failed to connect with conservatives. All that anti-Obama passion that was out there, he didn't capitalize on. I looked at the other options and thought he was the best chance we had. Conversely, the middle of the road voter saw him as the rich, out-of-touch guy who spent his career firing people.

MIKE: That 47 percent comment, I think, was the nail in the coffin.

JIM: I agree. That election was set up for us to win, and we ended up with a candidate who was like John Kerry without the windsurfing.

that" message] was a fraud. It rallied the people who were already on board. It was just, "Yeah, we built that." It was just another white guy just saying that he owned a company and great.

MOLLY: Well, I think that's part of the problem. When you look at who the Republican Party has been targeting — women and young voters, right? There are a lot of younger voters who haven't started their own business.

I think, generally speaking, when you're looking at women, while the economy's important, you go back to the social issues. That's what a lot of women are thinking about. I'm not somebody that puts the priority on that, but most women will. Abortion rights, gay marriage, those are [in the] top five issues almost every single time.

### **Lightbourn: So does the Republican Party need to change its messaging or change its position on issues?**

JIM: The answer to both is yes. Nobody in the Republican Party wants to say it. The reality is, you've heard it tonight. This group is the future voting bloc. You have a group of young conservatives who are going to be the next generation of leadership. They're telling you that their attitudes are shifting, and yet the party has said, "No."

**Sykes: Remember at the Republican convention the theme was, "We did build that." The Romney campaign was going to be about the economy. They didn't talk about the social issues, and that was their biggest mistake. What do you think?**

TOM: I think that we felt that [the "We did build

### **Sykes: How about the messaging?**

MIKE: We need to shorten the message. Get to the point, keep it simple.

JIM: I hate to say this because we're recording this, but Paul Ryan should have been the ideal candidate — he's young, good-looking — with kids. But come on, the campaign was Ross Perot,



a smart, great-looking guy with charts and figures.

Bill Clinton delivered a message through his appearance on David Letterman, playing a saxophone. Then the next three minutes was, “I’m for you. I’m for you. I’m a regular guy.” We Republicans never get there.

**Lightbourn: What concerns you about the conservative message on health care?**

LAURA: I provide my own health care for myself so I’m self-sufficient. But I’m also paying more out of pocket. There’s got to be an answer without the government providing it. However, that said, all of the problems with the insurance companies, pharmaceutical companies or the government and everything else, it’s a disaster.

JIM: Do you know what you didn’t say, Laura? What exactly is the Republican message?

MIKE: I couldn’t tell you.

JIM: Message-wise, why don’t we just give the health care issue to the Democrats?

AMANDA: My girlfriends are all employed. They have great jobs, and they don’t care for Obamacare. They’d rather just have insurance through their employer. They don’t want handouts, even my liberal friends don’t.

TOM: I think this is true of the conservatives and Republicans. They get fixated on a talking point. When you get beyond that, you realize there is this exception for women and children that need health care. But they never mention that point. Even the wealthiest woman knows how difficult it is to raise a child. These moms legitimately need help. The Republicans stop short on these talking points.



**Lightbourn: Why do you think the Republican Party doesn’t do better with minority voters?**

MIKE: It’s the old white man, white-haired party.

JAKE: In many districts, Republicans don’t compete at all. WisPolitics had a really interesting analysis of the last election. They tallied up the vote totals in 99 districts statewide. Even though Republicans held 60 of the 99 seats, Democrats actually tallied more Assembly votes statewide.

[GOP strategist] Mark Graul had a response where he said: No, the reason for more Democrat votes is because the Democrats run candidates for almost every single seat. Contrast that with Republicans, who don’t run a candidate in about 25 districts. I always found this interesting [at a time when] we want to reach out to minorities. Well, if you’re literally not running a single candidate [in Milwaukee], how are you offering an alternative message to the minority voter? You’re not.

JIM: With Scott Walker, I think in 2002 he received 35 percent support among African Americans and

in 2004, it was 40 percent of African Americans in the city. Why? They spent tens and tens of thousands of dollars and actual candidate time going to minority voters, researching, finding out what they thought the right message was and then delivering it.

MOLLY: I do think there's an issue when you can't attract minority voters. The problem is that the majority of the minority voters, if they don't lean left, they're moderate. They would never consider themselves as part of the Republican Party. Yet many of them have conservative views on social

# A blueprint for GOP reform

At the end of the evening, we went around the room and asked everyone to think big picture and tell us one thing that the Republican Party and conservatives in general need to do to attract young voters. We suspect younger conservatives will find themselves nodding in agreement. How will the Republican Party respond?

- Look outside the core, base group. "We have the data on why young voters aren't with us all the time, why Hispanic voters are moving away from us, why African American voters.... We know the answers. We just refuse to act on them."
- Ease up on the social issues to attract more women and gays. "The Democrats beat us by bringing up those issues — every single time."
- Get some celebrities. "As bad as it sounds ... take something out of the Democrat playbook. How many celebrities ran around the country preaching Obama who couldn't tell you one thing about the platform he stood on? Young voters felt that Obama was hip and trendy and just like them."
- Remember that it's about making a connection. "Successful candidates are less about the politics and more about the person. Are they engaging? Are they charismatic? Those are candidates who move the needle."
- Burn the old playbook. "Instead of trying to patch up flawed messaging that hasn't worked for years, instead of focusing on specific demographic targets, focus on all demographic targets."
- Find young candidates. "That is, young candidates willing to forthrightly argue that smaller, more efficient government will lead to jobs and a more stable economy."
- Add, add, add. "We need to be willing to reach out to other communities, to be less afraid to try different things to reach groups that maybe don't vote with us because they feel like Republicans are a lofty group that doesn't really care about people."
- Expand the base. "We have to be open to changing our perspective on things. I grew up as part of the base, and I understand the base. But frankly, the base is dying off. To continually retreat to satisfy the base without thinking of who else you could be reaching, we're just missing out on opportunities."
- Be more inclusive. "None of us thinks along the party line. I feel like the party is black and white. There's no gray. There's not even any room for a sliver. It's either you are with us on this, or you're a liberal."

— G.L.

issues. I don't know what the percentage is, but quite a few of them would agree with the [Republican] fiscal policy, too.

MIKE: The one ethnic group you guys haven't mentioned is probably the biggest bloc for the Republican Party. It's the Latino population. It's the fastest growing population in the country. It's mainly a Catholic-based population, a family-based population. They believe in a lot of the same things [that conservatives do], but then you throw in, again, another social issue or the immigration bill, they back off very quickly.

MIKE: Some of the conservatives are thinking that you have to put up a wall. However, all that the immigrants want to do is come here, work hard, raise a family and do the right thing.

JAKE: One of the bigger examples of terrible messaging was the debate where you had Mitt Romney talking about.... I don't think he mentioned the term self-deportation, but he meant it.

GROUP: Oh, no, he actually used that term.

**Lightbourn: Why do you think Marco Rubio is vulnerable with conservatives on immigration?**



JAKE: Because there's a real strong component in the Republican Party that, for whatever reason, just doesn't want to see any reform. The problem is they're not offering any real solution, because I think we all agree that we're not going

to start kicking individuals out who have children that are U.S. citizens.

**LIGHTBOURN: It's time to wrap up. We thank you for coming and sharing your honest opinions. Who knows, this conversation just might get the ball rolling. These are reasonable, conservative voices that tend not to be heard. ■**

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*George Lightbourn is the recently retired president of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute.*

### **Our roundtable**

Jim, 42, is a real estate executive.

Amanda, 28, is in sales.

Michael, 28, is in commercial real estate.

Carmen, 32, is an entrepreneur.

Thomas, 28, is a tech business owner.

Jake, 30, and Kate, 32, are attorneys.

Molly, 28, is a banker.

Charles, 28, is a wealth management advisor.

Laura, 36, is a small-business owner.

# Uncertainty and fear grip employers and insurers as Obamacare nears its launch



**BY MICHAEL FLAHERTY**

With no warning, the Obama administration announced in early July that large American employers would not be ordered to provide health insurance for their workers on Jan. 1, 2014, after all.

The one-year postponement of the “large employer mandate” of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act — widely known as “Obamacare” — came as a surprise.

But most Wisconsin observers were not shocked. The announcement, they reflected, was just another sign that Obamacare remains an extraordinary challenge. In the end, they wonder aloud whether the federal government can make it work at all.

And the clock, they note, is ticking on implementation. On Oct. 1, Wisconsin consumers and their health insurers will dive into one of the

most complicated and controversial federal social programs ever conceived. That's when the insurance mandate goes "live," and individual consumers and small businesses will begin signing up for health insurance, many of them using online "exchanges."

Wisconsin observers echo many national concerns that the road to universal health coverage is proving extremely rocky. And because the "insurance mandate" is so complex — its pages, when stacked, measure 7 feet tall and growing — they say that it may be too complicated to ever properly function or even begin to tackle the problems it was created to solve.

**"There is still a lot we just don't know yet,"** says Joanne Alig, senior vice president for policy and research for the Wisconsin Hospital Association. "We don't know what the federal web-based exchanges will look like. And we won't know which insurance companies will participate, where they're located, the premiums they'll charge, or what packages they'll offer until Sept. 9, less than a month before this goes live. It's all very uncertain."

This spring, observers noted that it was difficult to assess what the Affordable Care Act would finally look like because the rules kept changing, with three or four sets of guidance recommendations and new regulations arriving each week.



That's why, when President Obama postponed the mandate for larger employers until 2015, many Wisconsin observers weren't surprised. Federal officials had already indefinitely postponed the mechanism small businesses could use to help their employees sign up for the exchanges.

As such, the remaining focus right now is on the exchanges and how to make them function effectively for consumers in Wisconsin. Two looming questions hang over Obamacare, virtually everyone interviewed noted: Will most of the uninsured actually sign up for health

insurance? And will the prices and rules the government sets for health insurance be workable enough for health insurers to be able to participate and remain in business?

"Most questions now are about who is participating in the exchange, how will the exchange and subsidies work, and what are the medical needs of the new populations coming into the market, and how will that affect costs," notes Phil Dougherty, senior executive officer for the Wisconsin Association of Health Plans, which represents 10 Wisconsin health maintenance organizations.

"It's a nightmare," says one Wisconsin insurance sales manager whose company submitted "rates" to participate in the exchange this spring (and, thus, did not want to be identified for competitive reasons).



He questions whether his company would actually participate because the risks are so difficult to calculate.

“We were getting five, six new rules every week — in the form of changes, clarifications or additions that we hadn’t expected,” he says. “It’s my job to make sure we’re still in business at the end of the day. And we have no idea what this is finally going to look like.”

On top of the changing rules, he notes, the law requires insurers to provide health insurance for people they don’t know with risks (diseases, medical “preconditions” or chronic illnesses) they can’t easily calculate. The actuarial soundness of their coverage packages is in doubt as a result, he warns.

**It’s too early to throw in the towel, of course.**

The law is ambitious and complicated, but the health insurance industry is moving forward to participate and make the exchanges function with most major insurers. And several Wisconsin companies have already announced that they’ll participate despite the risks.

In addition, Obama’s announcement to postpone rules for large employers actually will have little immediate impact because 98 percent of all firms employing more than 200 workers already provide health insurance, and 94 percent of those with between 50 and 200 workers are providing at least some form of health insurance benefit, according

to the Kaiser Family Foundation, one of the nation’s most respected health care think tanks.

But the problems are real. Cost of the mandate is one of the reasons. Companies with more than

50 employees are being taxed 3.8 percent on their employer-provided health insurance premiums to help fund the ACA (“shared responsibility,” as it is called). And they were to pay fines of \$2,000 per employee (which grow to \$3,000 eventually) if they didn’t provide a substantial array of federally required health insurance policy benefits.

As of this writing, the mandate was postponed until 2015, but not the tax.

Individuals will also pay much

higher rates for health insurance, at least in the first year of Obamacare.

“The Affordable Care Act is starting to look more like the Unaffordable Care Act,” Dougherty jokes darkly.

**One insurer noted privately that he has seen**

proposed premium hikes for exchange-based health insurance ranging from 50 percent to as much as 600 percent. With those sorts of increases, industry officials worry that many individuals won’t sign up. They’ll simply pay the small fine and remain uninsured. If they get sick, they’ll head to the hospital emergency room, where everyone else in health care will pay their bills, precisely one of the problems Obamacare was supposed to address.

Even more profoundly, the ACA is riddled with

‘It’s a nightmare,’ says an insurance rep. He’s not sure his company will participate because the risks are too difficult to calculate

subtle incentives — some intended, some not — that may alter how employers offer health insurance in the first place. As employers begin to adapt to them, America’s traditional private health insurance model will remain at risk, which supposedly is the other problem the ACA was designed to address.

There’s plenty of blame to go around. Part of the problem stems from the actions of critics. Congress passed the ACA only after costly compromises with critics, who have since worked hard to undermine the law’s operation, despite cutting the earlier deals. The House of Representatives has already voted 37 times to overturn the law — and the July 2 postponement of the ACA’s rules for large companies created yet another round of heated political attacks on the new law.

The opposition isn’t just rhetorical. The Congressional Budget Office estimated that the new law would cost \$5 billion to \$10 billion to implement. After it finally passed, Congress provided only \$1 billion, 40 percent less than President George W. Bush received to implement his Medicare Part D drug plan for seniors, a far narrower and more targeted program.

In addition, 26 states, including Wisconsin, have refused to participate in the health exchanges. This means the federal government will create and operate those states’ exchanges (and parts of seven more), adding enormously to the cost and complexity of implementation.

Gov. Scott Walker said late last year that he rejected the idea of a state-based exchange because it’s the federal government’s baby. He points out that

the federal government is writing the rules and gives the states little ability to manage them. So it simply makes sense for the federal government to run its own program rather than saddling the state with the burden of making it work, he told reporters.

**To be sure, there is a long list of unresolved issues that could sink the implementation of the Affordable Care Act:**

- **The federal law** requires health insurers to cover everyone who signs up for coverage (called “guaranteed issue”). They can’t deny coverage for pre-existing conditions, and they’re forbidden both from dropping people who are sick and from charging more for those who are costly to insure. But the problem is that this part of the law, which goes into effect Jan. 1, provides no guarantees that customers will stick with those health insurers and pay premiums into the future.

So, for example, under the ACA, a person with a bum knee can enroll in an insurance plan, undergo reconstructive surgery and then drop coverage. Multiply that tactic by a few thousand customers, and that’s not just an actuarial problem for insurers, that’s bankruptcy.

- **The very foundation** of Obamacare — universal coverage — rests on fairly sandy actuarial soil as well. The law provides subsidies for enrolling people whose incomes are up to 400 percent of the federal poverty level. But the penalties for not enrolling are laughably weak, \$95 a year, or 1

‘The Affordable Care Act is starting to look more like the Unaffordable Care Act,’ says an observer

percent of a person's income, whichever is higher.

Says one insurer, rolling his eyes: "If a young man faces thousands of dollars in increased health insurance premium costs, he might decide instead to pay the \$95 and gamble he won't get sick. I can't say that's an illogical decision."

That's also why many observers are skeptical of the Congressional Budget Office's estimate that only 16 million Americans will be without health insurance in 2019. The actual number could be far greater.

- **Those young males** (called "invincibles" in insurance-speak) pose actuarial problems in another profound way. They're the healthiest group (or at least the group with the fewest health care bills), and they're the most willing to risk going without health insurance. The ACA is banking on that group to join the ranks of the insured and start paying premiums — and pay them at much higher rates — to help cover the nation's health care bills.

But that may be an unfulfilled hope. Young men currently pay the least for individual health insurance, which means they'll also likely face the highest increases in September when the ACA's "community rates" are announced. Federal officials are banking on them to voluntarily enroll and pay sharply higher premiums. But given that the penalty is so small for refusing to do so, health insurance observers say that may be wishful thinking.

- **The actuarial threat** on the other end of the "cost" spectrum is sick people with expensive, chronic medical conditions. They were once considered uninsurable. Now private health insurers will have to cover them, creating enormous and unpredictable costs for those companies.

The exchanges could end up being an insurance vehicle only for those high-risk people, according to

## The challenge of reform

*Critics of Obamacare have plenty of ammunition to fire at America's new federal health care law. But even Obamacare's strongest critics would agree that the current health care model was in serious disrepair. Consider:*

- *In 2010 when the ACA was passed, almost 50 million people — 16 percent of all Americans — were uninsured. Those 50 million were still receiving health care. But the cost was being covered by health care systems, which passed it back to businesses and individuals who were paying for insurance. Those "free riders" cost the nation \$116 billion in 2008, a hidden cost of about \$1,000 per policyholder, according to Families USA, a consumer advocacy group.*
- *Health care costs are taking a serious bite out of the U.S. economy's competitive position around the world. The average family health insurance policy now costs \$15,745, according to a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, which surveyed 2,000 employers around the country. That amounts to a significant cost per worker, putting U.S. companies at a disadvantage against world trading competitors that do not pay the employers' share of workers' health insurance out of business revenues.*
- *Health care costs were breaking families as well. In 2011, two-thirds of the 1.6 million personal bankruptcies nationally were due to financial problems related to high medical expenses — and three fourths of those people had health insurance coverage. The average worker with a family paid \$4,316 out of pocket to help pay for that coverage, according to Kaiser.*
- *America wasn't getting its money's worth. An Institute of Medicine study this year reported that the United States, when compared with 17 "peer nations," ranked at or near the bottom in nine key areas of health care.*

## What Obamacare does

*Many of the new health care rules, such as incentives to increase the number of family practice physicians and improve access to care, are already in place. So are health insurance rules that forbid health insurers from denying coverage to children with pre-existing conditions, or from dropping people from insurance coverage once they become sick. A provision that allows children to remain on their parents' health insurance policies until they're 26 years old also has taken effect.*

*Here's what Obamacare does beginning Jan. 1, 2014:*

- 1. Expands the ban on denying coverage to adults who have pre-existing conditions.*
- 2. Provides tax credits to help citizens pay for health insurance if their income is below 400 percent of the poverty level, which is \$88,000 for a family of four.*
- 3. Requires states to have health insurance exchanges for consumers to purchase coverage. Enrollment opens Oct. 1 and extends through March 31.*
- 4. Assesses escalating penalties against individuals who do not choose coverage: the greater of \$95 or 1 percent of income in 2014; \$325 or 2 percent of income in 2015; \$695 or 2.5 percent of income in 2016.*

Lon Sprecher, president and CEO of Dean Health Plan. Taking part in a panel discussion of insurance CEOs in June, Sprecher warned that consumers could decide en masse not to participate in the cumbersome process. "What if the federal government holds this party and no one shows up?" Sprecher asked.

The high-risk "uninsurables" pose enormous risks. Wisconsin, like many states, has operated an insurance-industry-supported insurance pool to provide insurance for high-risk people. This approach isolated them from the general pool of customers so that no one insurer would risk bankruptcy if it drew too many high-risk customers. The program, called the High Risk Sharing Pool, provided insurance for more than 21,000 patients in Wisconsin in 2011 at a cost of nearly \$140 million.

The new law taxes health insurance plans to temporarily provide a federal pool of money to "reinsure" health insurance companies for their high-risk members. But there are few guarantees in a federal program this large and complicated. In addition to trying to calculate their potential risks, Wisconsin insurers will have to stand in line with companies from 25 other states to compete for that federal pool of money.

How much money will actually be available is anyone's guess.

- **Certain ACA rules** seem doomed to create problems. Those who sign up for individual coverage have a "grace period" of 90 days, which means they can go three months without paying their premiums before insurers can drop them. If they get sick or hurt, health insurance companies still have to cover their treatment. The problem is that the 90-day grace period can be gamed. Deadbeats can sign up for coverage in the last three months of the year, not pay for it, and then

repeat the dodge in the following year.

- **Finally, enforcement** of the new law will be hugely complicated. Because 26 states will rely entirely on the federal government to run the exchanges, the feds will also be in charge of enforcing the rules. Critics question whether the government has the resources to (a) enforce compliance for the millions of Americans who stop paying their premiums, (b) levy penalties for failing to enroll, and (c) ensure that employers and insurance companies follow the ACA's complicated mandates.

Many of the penalties and incentives in the ACA are levied through the federal tax code, and the IRS is adding thousands of agents. But tracking compliance isn't as simple as checking a tax return, as Obamacare relies on data from health insurers, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, state health agencies, and Homeland Security (for immigration status). Making these agency computers talk to one another is no small task.

**Here's something that most people, including** Obamacare advocates, don't understand: The cost of health insurance under the ACA will continue to rise — and in some cases rise dramatically in 2014.

The fact is, the ACA was never intended to dramatically lower health insurance costs. It was designed to slow the deathly spiral of health care

costs that was eventually going to sink America's health care industry — and, most likely, the private health insurance business model. At least in the first year, some are predicting health insurance price increases that will be well above the hikes that would have occurred without the ACA in place.

Meanwhile, some observers even question if the exchanges will actually go live on Jan. 1. When the ACA architects ran a simulated test in April, it didn't work. The software program that was supposed to calculate rates for small businesses was so shaky that its implementation was put off for another year.

Indeed, the eligibility rules are so complicated that individual members of families could actually qualify for different levels of care at different prices at different subsidy levels. This would

require each member to hold a different health insurance card.

Such knotty permutations seem likely in Obamacare.

It is unclear whether the federal government will pull it all together by Jan. 1, health insurers and industry analysts agree. However, something will be launched. They say it's anyone's guess whether it will work, what it will cost and whether it will achieve its goals. ■

What if the federal government holds this party and no one shows up? asks Dean Health's Lon Sprecher

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*Mike Flaherty is a former Madison freelance writer who recently was named public affairs director for Meriter Health Services, which is the majority owner of Physicians Plus health insurance*



# ‘We got through it’

*When the governor rebalanced state operations, his wife and sons felt the angry backlash*

*Tonette Walker clearly remembers turning on the television to watch the 5 o’clock news one dark February evening in 2011 and being shocked by the sight of thousands of protestors surrounding the state Capitol building.*

*She picked up the phone and called the governor of Wisconsin, her husband, Scott. “Whoever answered said Scott was busy,” she remembers. “That was different, because he always takes my calls. So I insisted, and they finally put me through. I said ‘What are you guys doing!?!’*

*“And then he told me, and I understood,” she says.*

*It was her first inkling that being the first lady of Wisconsin was not going to be a cakewalk. “But I don’t think any of us had any idea” just how vicious the fight over Walker’s budget repair bill would become.*

*After all, Walker had been in office just six weeks when he announced that, in response to a projected \$3.6 billion budget shortfall, the state would begin requiring almost all public employees to contribute to their health insurance and retirement accounts, and would no longer allow public employee unions to bargain over such contributions.*

Madison, where seven of the 10 biggest employers are government entities, exploded in protest, and opponents of Walker's actions launched a 15-month vitriolic campaign to oust him.

In addition to the throngs at the Capitol, there were protesters outside the governor's official residence in Maple Bluff and outside the Walkers' personal home in Wauwatosa.

She remembers being accosted and verbally abused in the supermarket. Their two sons, Matthew and Alex, both in high school at the time, were harassed at school and online.

"We got through it," she would later tell a newspaper, "with a lot of prayer and family and friends."

She had learned early on that life sometimes takes strange — and cruel — twists and turns.

**Tonette Tarantino grew up in a working class neighborhood of Milwaukee.** Her parents were pro-union Democrats who owned several small businesses.

"My dad," she says, "had the gift of gab. He was full of ideas. Remember that old saying 'Jack of all trades, master of none'? That was my dad."

It never occurred to the young Tonette to go to college, she says with a rueful grin. "Like most of the girls I grew up with, I was raised to be a mom."

After high school, she went to work at an insurance company and by age 23, she was married. She says she knew her first husband had kidney disease, but had no idea how quickly it would kill him. She was 30 when he died of complications following his second kidney transplant.

Five years later, in 1992, she and her roommate went to karaoke night at Saz's State House restaurant in Milwaukee, where she locked eyes with a good-looking, dark-haired young man with a crooked grin.

They kept looking at each other all night, but they never spoke. Then he got up to leave and passed her a napkin on which he had written his phone number and "Forgive me, I have to get up early in the morning

to work but if you'd like to go out with me, call me."

"The way Scott tells it, I called the next day. But I'm sure I waited an appropriate amount of time, like a week, before I called," she says.

Just a few months later, he took her back to Saz's for dinner, and passed her another napkin on which he'd written "Forgive me, but will you marry me?"

They were married in February 1993. He was 26. She was 37.

That April, he was elected to the Assembly in a special election to replace Peggy Rosenzweig, who had been elected to the state Senate.

Her parents were far more worried about their age difference than the fact that their new son-in-law was a

Republican politician, she says.

Their two children came quickly. Their older son, Alex, now a student at Marquette University, was born in 1994, followed 13 months later by second son, Matthew, who will be a freshman at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the fall.

Alex, following in his father's footsteps, is a political science major. Matthew, who has "a mind of his own," says his mother, plans to major in engineering.

The governor, she adds, is a great father.

"He's a better dad than I am a mom. He's more patient, more thoughtful.

"When he was in the Legislature, he commuted in a car pool an hour and 10 minutes each way, every day. And by the time he got home, he was completely focused on us."

Originally, she says, the Walkers had planned to move the family to Madison when Scott became governor.

The boys, she said, weren't happy about moving away from their friends and sports team. "I was kind of dragging my feet, trying to decide where they should go to school in Madison," she says.

Then the protests erupted, and Scott's mother volunteered to move in with the boys so they could stay in Wauwatosa. "If they had been in a Madison

## *Tonette Walker remembers being accosted and verbally abused in the supermarket.*



school, it wouldn't have been very nice for them," she adds. "They didn't sign up for this job."

The Walkers split their time between Wauwatosa and Madison, with Tonette spending most of her time in the Milwaukee suburb. But with both boys in college this fall, she envisions staying in Madison more often.

**One aspect of being first lady** that she enjoys is volunteer work. She continues to raise money for the American Lung Association, a job she started after she was laid off from her job in the insurance industry.

She also works with the Trauma-Informed Care movement, which tries to help young people recover from childhood traumas, and with Teen Challenge, a faith-based approach to helping young people with drug and alcohol abuse problems.

She also gives out monthly "Wisconsin Hero" awards to people throughout the state who have contributed to their communities. But the presentations are deliberately low-key and unannounced, to keep attention focused on the recipients and to deter protestors from ruining the events.

"I sneak in" to present the awards, she says.

She is also overseeing some remodeling of the governor's mansion, built in 1920 and last renovated in 1973. It's in need of some serious upgrades, including a new kitchen, she says, but the process is lengthy and complicated.

"You just don't go out and buy a new rug. You have to get 10 other people involved in the decision-making," she says.

Her most public efforts are periodic "Walks with Walker," exploring both famous and lesser-known

hiking trails that are open to the public.

A diabetic, she is conscientious about exercise. She misses being able to just go for a walk without informing a state trooper about her plans.

In fact, she chafes under the restrictions imposed by the "dignitary protection unit" that dogs the family's every move. Although she accepts the responsibilities forced on her by her husband's job, she is at heart a private person forced into a very public position.

"I miss being spontaneous," she says. "And I miss talking to Scott in the car.

"I was at a meeting with other first ladies, and we all said the same thing: We miss being alone in the car with our husbands and just talking. The troopers are very nice and they would never reveal anything we would say, but you just can't talk like you would if you were alone.

"Scott misses it, too," she adds. "He can't go anywhere without at least two state troopers with him."

**Having had thousands of angry people waving** placards right outside her front door, she understands the need for heightened security.

"After the recall was over," she says, "the governor's staff put together a book on the protests. I've seen it, but I won't read it.

"It makes me sick — and very, very sad. I've heard people say that they still won't speak to their cousin or that they lost a good friend over the recall, and it hurts to hear that." ■




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*Sunny Schubert is a Monona freelance writer and blogger and a former editorial writer for the Wisconsin State Journal.*



GE

# Inside MPS

BY MIKE NICHOLS

## *Superintendent Thornton fails to inspire innovation and openness, three former administrators say in candid interviews*

By early summer, as Greg Thornton ended his third year at the helm of Milwaukee's public schools, there were already more than a dozen superintendent positions posted on *Education Week's* website, including three in smaller, less complicated and chaotic districts in Pennsylvania, his native state.

There were also lots of listings for art and physical education teachers, playground aides and, out in Arizona, even an opening for a school district graffiti remover — all jobs, to hear critics tell it, that might let the superintendent make a bigger and more tangible long-term difference than he has in the Milwaukee Public Schools district.

It's easy to deride urban school superintendents facing high levels of unyielding poverty, droves of children with behavioral and learning disabilities and, too often, little family support.

Louis Birchbauer, a former school superintendent and now a consultant for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, declined to talk specifically about Thornton or MPS. He said, though, that the larger the district, the greater the conflicting expectations from competing interests, the more intense the glare from the media, and the more complicated the political considerations. Academicians use superintendents as the perfect specimen for demonstrating the effects of stress on job performance and health.

Still, as rumors swirl that the highly paid superintendent with perhaps the most important job in Milwaukee is not long for the office, three of his former administrators paint a picture of a man whose approach has been nearly the opposite of what MPS needs at a uniquely opportune moment: a leader who can inspire innovation, collaboration, risk-taking and openness.

The three ex-officials had substantial responsibilities in the Thornton administration

and worked within and outside the MPS central office. They spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear their comments might hurt their careers. In separate interviews, they described a district hobbled by poor organizational structure, lack of internal communication, deficient public relations and altogether too little enthusiasm for tackling the Herculean task of bettering the lives and prospects of tens of thousands of Milwaukee's struggling children.

Like other failed superintendents before him, they say in often-blunt language, Thornton, in his effort to bring discipline and focus to an enormous and unwieldy district, has robbed

talented employees of the latitude and spirit they need to make a difference.

**When he was hired, Thornton spoke of 'a moral imperative' to help kids be successful.**

**Some of this criticism is perhaps inevitable.**

"It just becomes very challenging to keep a coalition" together to move forward with any sort of agenda, Birchbauer says.

There is also a natural propensity for ambitious leaders in spotlight positions to control as many variables as possible.

Thornton's emphasis on controlling the district's external messaging, for instance, is obvious — and, to some extent, understandable — to those who have tried to gather information about MPS. Public entities have to nurture a positive image. It is customary in many organizations to require employees to give advance notice to the communications staff about any contacts with the media. But "under the current administration, we had to be given permission to speak to the press, and we were

almost never given permission,” says a former central office employee.

While that has prevented gaffes and possibly limited the extent of negative coverage, some feel it has kept the district from clearly communicating both the struggles it faces and the many good things it accomplishes. Principals and others who might want the community — or colleagues — to know about a successful program or an inspiring child are less likely to jump through the hoops and take the chance of going public. The district, goes the criticism, is simply not doing a very good job of telling positive stories.

Tony Tagliavia, the MPS media manager, strongly disagrees and takes issue with the criticisms voiced by the former district employees.

“I wouldn’t consider that fair or accurate,” he said in an e-mail. “Many of the stories we share come directly from our own teachers and staff. Just looking at news items we’ve formally shared with the media and the public so far this school year, 54 specifically celebrated the success of students, staff and families.”

While external communications are more important than ever, given the competition for students among various types of schools in Milwaukee, restrictions on them are emblematic of a broader problem, say the former insiders.

“What I can say from having been inside the district is, certainly, under the current administration, there is very tight control over everything, not just media access,” says the former central office employee who worked under Thornton and feels the superintendent has

“restricted the historical autonomy of leadership” throughout the district.

“Communication [inside] MPS is very hierarchical. Thornton made that clear in the first two weeks,” the former central office employee said. The then-new superintendent made sure employees knew, “‘If I hear directly from you and not your supervisor, I know there is a problem with your supervisor and he or she should be fired.’”

“He absolutely did not have an open door policy,” says the former employee. Thornton is “a control freak.”

**Thornton ‘absolutely did not have an open door policy,’ says an ex-staffer who describes him as ‘a control freak.’**

**While perhaps effective** at keeping schools and

the central office running in an orderly fashion, such an approach comes at great expense, according to Doug Lemov, the managing director of Uncommon Schools and the author of *Teach Like a Champion*, a nationally recognized study of urban teachers and their methods. He stresses that he could speak only in general terms rather than about MPS or Thornton specifically.

A propensity to try to control everything, suggests Lemov, undermines effective teaching.

“Giving your leaders — your principals and teachers — the right to make real decisions... to solve problems, to spend money and time, is a form of trusting people, and when you trust people, they often turn out to be very good problem-solvers,” he says. “I’m pretty sure Milwaukee is a district full of smart people who understand how to make things work better. There isn’t a problem someone, somewhere in the organization, couldn’t solve tomorrow. It’s just a



matter of finding that person, and maybe building a system that encourages them to try... and that keeps them in the organization by rewarding their good ideas.”

Indeed, says the former central office employee, Thornton is seen internally as being distrustful. The former central office employee felt, moreover, that the atmosphere of control did not stem so much from concern about the district’s image as from the superintendent’s concern about his own.

“I think Greg Thornton is committed to

burnishing his image so he can get a position elsewhere.”

Tagliavia denies that Thornton is going anywhere. His contract doesn’t expire until June 2015, and Tagliavia says the superintendent intends to remain through the end of his term.

If he does, Thornton would be here a total of five years, a long time for any big urban superintendent, especially, perhaps, one with no personal roots in Wisconsin.

Thornton, who was paid \$265,000 in 2012,

**The right MPS leader  
can have a decisive impact  
on academic performance.**

is a Philadelphia native who attended Temple University. He began his career as a teacher and worked his way up through jobs and districts large and small along the East Coast. Immediately prior to being hired by a unanimous MPS School Board in 2010, he was the superintendent of the 7,800-student Chester Upland Public Schools in southeastern Pennsylvania. He'd previously held administrative positions in Winston-Salem, N.C., and Montgomery County, Md., and once served as chief academic officer for Philadelphia's enormous 189,000-student school system.

**Thornton was not** available for comment.

During the initial interview process in Milwaukee, though, he spoke of "a moral imperative" to help kids be successful, and the "degree of urgency" needed to achieve that. He was criticized in the media for a personal bankruptcy back in the late-1990s that he said was the result of his decision to back a restaurant he was trying to get off the ground while also working as a principal. This was seen as evidence of the sort of entrepreneurial spirit that reformers say urban schools badly need.

A truism of urban school reformers is that administrators and schools should be creative, willing to try new approaches and — ergo — sometimes fail. Thornton seems to have shown that sort of drive and resilience in his personal life.

And yet, suggests a second former MPS administrator, he has not turned out to be the

sort of leader who encourages risk-taking or innovation in others. "This is his classic line: Everybody needs to stay in their lane."

That second administrator said the superintendent does "not want any grandstanding." But the result is that, outside a small group that he is very reliant upon, he also does not encourage or develop many other leaders in a sprawling district with the equivalent of 9,300 full-time employees.

That former administrator echoed the complaint that Thornton "wants to control everything" and is not accessible — or, conversely, proactive in finding and replicating good things

happening in the district.

"Nobody ever came to us and said, 'Hey, what are you doing over there? What can we replicate?'" said the second administrator. That former administrator goes so far as to say MPS now has a "culture of fear" among employees, many of whom have moved on since Thornton came to the district.

Of the more than 180 MPS schools open when Thornton came to Milwaukee, 158 remained (some under new names) two years later in October 2012, according to a *Wisconsin Interest* analysis. Of those, 86 — or 54 percent — had different principals or leaders at the end of that two-year span, and an unknown number of others will have new leadership by the time school opens this fall.

In fairness, some turnover is the result of reshuffling of individuals who now have other

**Thornton has not encouraged innovation in others. 'This is his classic line: Everybody needs to stay in their lane,' says a former MPS staffer.**

jobs. This includes resignations prompted by pension and benefits changes.

“Most of the turnover we’ve seen at the principal and district administrator level has been due to retirements,” said Tagliavia. “We have also promoted some principals to other schools. We certainly have seen some staff leave to go on to higher-level positions, and while we were sad to see them leave, that certainly speaks highly of their work here and the work we do as a district. There has not been an exodus of leadership from the district.”

The media manager also disagrees with the underlying accusations.

Thornton regularly meets with employees from senior administrators to principals to teachers to support staff, according to Tagliavia. He holds monthly meetings with groups of teachers and central office staff to hear their feedback and ideas, meets monthly with all principals and frequently with principals and other staff in one-on-one conversations.

“Throughout his tenure, Dr. Thornton has hired or promoted high-level leaders who were specifically selected because of their strong, independent ideas and thoughts. At times, these ideas are different than his own, which is precisely the reason he selected them.”

**Whatever the cause of the turnover, says a third education professional who talked to *Wisconsin Interest*, it is unfortunate, because there has been a large loss of institutional knowledge.**

This veteran says that MPS actually has a siloed

organizational structure, with both its central office departments and its regions. Power and turf issues dissuade people from picking up the phone to call somebody outside their area and ask a question or offer assistance. There is no compelling reason district employees would want to collaborate.

Again, Tagliavia disagreed, going so far as to say that “cross-department collaboration is the way this superintendent does business; to say staff from different departments cannot pick up the phone and talk to staff from another department is absolutely false.”

As an example, he pointed to the Learning Journeys program, which he said connects students with Discovery World, the Milwaukee Public Museum and Junior Achievement and

requires collaboration among school leaders, curriculum experts and the Division of Community Engagement.

“Any claim the superintendent is not interested in innovation or curious about successes that might be replicated is flatly

false. The superintendent has worked aggressively to replicate and expand successful programs,” said Tagliavia.

Three years into his tenure, Thornton has had his successes, most noticeably a graduation rate that rose to 69 percent for 2011 — up almost 2 percent from 2010 and the continuation of a long-term trend.

And yet almost 90 percent of eighth-graders are still not rated proficient in reading or math, and large numbers of both MPS and Milwaukee private high school graduates need remedial help when they try to move on to college. Education, too

**Thornton meets monthly with groups of teachers and central office staff. He welcomes independent thinking, his press aide says, rebutting the critics.**



often, is no longer their way up or out.

**Greg Thornton is, of course, not the first** superintendent to fail to significantly improve MPS achievement and, even among the former administrators who talked to *Wisconsin Interest*, there is disagreement over whether the problems are the result of Thornton's particular style or are stubbornly systemic.

One of the three, while describing the same basic flawed organizational structure, lack of communication and lack of collaboration, was much less apt to attribute it to Thornton than to broader, deeper issues. From that person's perspective, there have been similar problems under past superintendents, an observation that raises the question of whether big, traditional, urban districts logically trying to have a coherent, common mission in all their schools inevitably move toward centralized, bureaucratic control that stifles collaboration and innovation.

But even this education professional believes that the right leader can make a difference in the lives of MPS students and can give teachers both the latitude and motivation necessary.

Indeed, one of the most damning criticisms from one of the former administrators is also one of the most difficult to quantify. There is, goes the charge, "no spirit" in the district anymore.

Spirit is a hard thing to resurrect, and both the extent of its dearth and Thornton's ability and desire to conjure it up again are up for discussion.

He is in his late 50s. Superintendents lauded as saviors when they walk in the door of the nation's biggest districts are often long gone three or four years later.

There is reason to believe, however, that the right MPS leader can have a decisive impact on academic performance.

Thanks to Act 10, the burdensome union contract that has hampered the district for almost 50 years finally expired at the end of June. The state has

secured a waiver from the onerous regulations of the No Child Left Behind law. School leaders have more freedom to use public dollars in ways that buck tradition than ever before. There is a chance in MPS to finally let good practices flourish and good people prosper — and, given the competition from choice and charter schools, an overwhelming need to share and even brag about the same.

Or else we'll continue to see good people peruse the same job postings that Greg Thornton is said to be eyeing. ■

**'Giving your principals and teachers the right to make real decisions...is a form of trusting people, and when you trust people, they often turn out to be very good problem-solvers,' says a school reformer.**

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*Mike Nichols is the new president of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute.*

**Read MPS media manager Tony Tagliavia's full e-mail replies to *Wisconsin Interest's* questions at [wpri.org](http://wpri.org).**



## Too good to be ignored

*Rebecca Kleefisch is a stone's throw away from higher office*

Three days before last year's recall election, Wisconsin Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch took the stage before 4,000 supporters at Gorney Park near Racine. Kleefisch, who faced a recall challenge from Madison firefighter Mahlon Mitchell, told the raucous crowd that her battle with the public sector unions was similar to David versus Goliath. She called Gov. Scott Walker's union reforms the "stones" they would use to take down the out-of-state public sector Goliath.

Finally, after pausing for effect, Kleefisch raised her voice, "Our opponents, despite their money and their muscle, don't have the stones!"



Later, I asked her about the presumably ribald reference. "I was in the middle of telling a Bible story, and people just started laughing. I can't explain it," she said.

Stones indeed.

In the most under-covered story of the recall, Kleefisch would go on to defeat Mitchell 53 percent

to 47 percent, an almost identical margin to Walker's victory over Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett. The fact that Kleefisch was up for recall at all was an oddity. She had nothing to do with passage of the collective bargaining law, but became a target merely because she was a Republican in office who supported Walker.

Normally, governors and lieutenant governors run together, so their fates are linked. But in the recall, Kleefisch had to stand on her own. And although she spent a comparatively meager \$601,000 in the months preceding the election (Walker spent \$21 million in the same period), voters sent her back to Madison. (Mitchell spent \$166,000.)

In demonstrating her strength as a stand-alone candidate in a low-profile race, Kleefisch has solidified her place as a rising star in Wisconsin politics. And she might still be on the rise. How far she will rise is an intriguing political question.

Conservatives around Wisconsin have been fitted with shock collars that go off any time they mention that the state's current governor is rumored to be a — BZZZZZZZZT! — candidate for national office in 2016. With a heavy national speaking schedule, including a highly effective trip to Iowa to rally Republicans there, Scott Walker has reached the A-list of — BZZZZZZZZT! — potential presidential candidates.

It still seems like a long shot, but were Walker to catch fire and win nationally, it would leave Kleefisch as the state's chief executive, assuming she and Walker are re-elected in 2014. But even if a Walker presidential candidacy didn't pan out, Kleefisch has built the name recognition and fundraising prowess to be a formidable candidate in other races.

## The left has taken glee in attacking conservative women.

For instance, Kleefisch lives in septuagenarian U.S. Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner's district. While there's a long line of Republicans itching to run for that seat, Kleefisch could have a nationwide fundraising operation in place by the time Sensenbrenner hangs it up. Similarly, U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin will be up for re-election in 2018, and it never hurts to challenge a freshman senator with a candidate who has won statewide. Or, who knows — maybe in 2018, Walker decides that two terms is enough, and leaves the gubernatorial field wide open.

When Kleefisch's critics read the preceding paragraph, soymilk will shoot from their nostrils. The left in Wisconsin has taken glee in attacking conservative women generally and Kleefisch specifically. Madison radio host John "Sly" Sylvester mocked Kleefisch's 2010 battle with colon cancer and suggested she rose to her office by performing sex acts. Following a Walker speech, one particularly ardent protester yelled, "Your wife is a [bleeping] whore!" at her husband, Joel, who serves in the Assembly.

But it isn't a stretch to consider that in a few years — BZZZZZZZZT! — Kleefisch could be making her name in a higher office. Assuming she has the stones. ■

*Christian Schneider writes for The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, National Review and other national outlets.*

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