

**Thursday, February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2006**  
**Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

### **LOUISIANA DEMOCRATS HAVE BIG CHALLENGE AHEAD**

Do you want to know how disjointed and out of focus the Louisiana Democratic Party is right now? Just look at what happened in last week's election for a state party chairman. Baton Rouge lawyer and long-time party loyalist, Chris Whittington was the early favorite, and ended up winning a big victory. But look who opposed him.

Whittington was opposed by almost the entire Democratic Party hierarchy. Opposition came from the Governor, Lieutenant-Governor, Attorney General, the two Democratic U.S. Congressmen and the Democratic U.S. Senator. Now that sounds like power. What a hill to climb to overcome the support of these folks. Whittington did it, and won going away.

The deal apparently was that the new chairman had to agree to serve for only one term. Rumors have been swirling around the Capitol for weeks that the party's top dogs wanted to keep the seat warm for present Secretary of State Al Ater, who steps down when the new Secretary of State is elected in November. Whittington said, "No way," and for good reason. He felt like he had paid his dues over the years, was a party loyalist who wanted to support those in power, and felt he was being sidetracked in an effort to hold the seat for somebody else.

He did have the support of the guy who continues to be the strongest public official in the state, none other than the maligned Agriculture Commissioner, Bob Odom. Big Bob had his hand on the party pulse for months. Bob never stops work at politicking. Just as they say you "never bet against the Steelers," (whether they win or loose, take the points. You would have won both ways last Sunday.) don't ever bet against Bob Odom. He knows how to put coalitions together, and he solidly elected Chris Whittington to head up the party apparatus.

For years, the Democratic Party has been little more than a "cheering section" to help incumbents get re-elected. There was never an "issue-driven" agenda, merely an operation to help those in office on Election Day. As a consequence, most major Democratic officials ran under their own party label. They sought votes and money from both sides of the isle, and only turned to the Democratic Party to help "get out the vote" on Election Day. For all practical purposes, the party in recent years has been irrelevant.

Whittington hopes to change that approach, and move more towards an "issue-driven" party apparatus. If the statewide officials in office are smart and paying attention, they will get on board and help him drive this agenda.

In his first day on the job, Whittington received commitments from the National Party in Washington to fund a number of new party positions. A major focus ought to be interest and development of strong issues to help unite a disjointed party.

The Republicans in Louisiana have some momentum going for them right now. The Governor has taken some heavy blows, and all incumbents face a Katrina backlash. Republican Congressman Bobby Jindal is obviously running for Governor, and you can count on the Republican Party to field an entire slate of candidates that will be well funded.

But right now, they have around their necks the problems out of Washington where more and more Louisianans feel the Republican Congress has handed government over to corrupt interests and have betrayed basic American principals of honesty, competence, and fairness. Louisiana Republican candidates will keep their distance and shy away from any ties to Washington. And so far, they too have no agenda other than opposition to the Governor in Baton Rouge.

So if Whittington and company are smart, they will spend some time this spring conducting issues forums and doing some listening around the state in order to develop a comprehensive list of objectives that will be comfortable to future Democratic candidates. Don't sit back and let the Governor set any agenda. Although she may bounce back, she's on the ropes right now. So the Democrats have to go "beyond those in office" and start plotting their own agenda for the future.

There is a whole list of issues and ideas that have not been touched by those presently running the state. Let me throw out a few ideas, some of which I have talked about before. Here are a few:

1. Call for the creation of the office of Inspector-General for Efficiency. We have every candidate for governor in the first primary talked about "rooting out the waste" and making government more efficient. And after being in office for the past thirty years, I can concur that most agencies in state government can be run more efficiently. An Inspector General can set up a mechanism to monitor state agencies for the purpose of improving productivity. The audit could be an important tool in working with state agencies at every level to "get more bang for the buck." We used to elect a comptroller in Louisiana. An appointed position working under the direction of the governor could back up the numerous campaign promises eliminating waste and making the state system more efficient. It may even be possible to create such an office by executive order, or at a minimum, by an act of the legislature. And who would want to oppose such an idea? Why not jump on this democrats?
2. Urge the bringing down the hammer on Indian casinos that are making outrageous profits, yet are contributing virtually nothing back to the state. Louisiana taxpayers are spending millions in support of casinos operated on Indian reservations without any return. The casinos in the state receive free police and fire protection, and taxpayers pay for the highways that bring gamblers right up to the casino front doors. Yet these Indian casinos are not paying their way. Now I know, Governor, you are going to hear the argument that the Indian tribes are immune from state enforcement. But do a little creative thinking. There are certainly some other ways to skin this cat. These tribes are subject to Louisiana's criminal and civil laws, and creative legal minds can find some ways to see that these Indian casinos pay their fair share. What kinds of taxes are being paid by the suppliers of these casinos? Build public roads away from the casinos, or make the highways in front of the casino toll roads. Heck, there has to be some ways to

deal with these problems. A strong interest and commitment, if nothing else may bring these casinos to the bargaining table, and they will hopefully pay their fair share voluntarily. But it is an affront to the average Louisianan to see tax dollars subsidizing these casinos, all being run by out-of-state gambling interests. If they are going to operate in the state, they need to contribute. A good democratic issue to talk up, since the republicans are involved in a major scandal in Washington (Jack Aberoff and Co.) involving the same Louisiana Indian tribes.

3. Make Louisiana grade schools experimental laboratories to see how we can get better results. Why does every school system have to operate the same? We are obviously not getting the results for better schools based on the dollars we are spending. Put Louisiana in the forefront of experimentation in education.
  - First of all, pick several parishes that will convert their large, factory-styled schools that often have 1,000 students of more into smaller schools where students have closed contact with teachers. There are private grants out there to do this very thing. (Start with the Gates Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation) Established research indicates that small class sizes - 15 or fewer – can often make a tremendous difference in producing higher test scores. Pick some key schools for experimentation; begin with classes in kindergarten through third grade. I don't know what will happen; but let's see what results we get.
  - Give vouchers a try in several parishes on an experimental basis. Now I know that the teachers groups are going to go bananas when you suggest this. But don't bite the whole apple. Several parishes could try this on an experimental basis over the next several years. What do we have to loose?
  - Should local school boards be running our schools? Just look at New Orleans if you want to see a disaster in the making. Allegations are rampant of millions of dollars being ripped off with very little accountability. The Mayor of New Orleans, as are most mayors of cities throughout the state, is charged with the economic well-being of the city. A key ingredient in this economic development is the quality of the work force available. This quality is all based on education. Yet we don't bring the mayor into the formula for developing this work force. Mayors are directly involved in picking superintendents and directing policy in public schools in New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Chicago. Why not give it a try, on an experimental basis, in a few key cities here in Louisiana?
  - All of these education suggestions are controversial and will meet with opposition. But pushing them on an "experimental" basis in a few parishes so that you can have some tangible results to evaluate just makes common sense. And the cost of all of these suggestions is minimal. Democrats have always given "knee jerk responses" to whatever teacher's organizations wanted. He's a chance to offer some bold ideas for a change.

4. Call for a mini-constitutional convention to re-write the state tax laws. A number of gubernatorial candidates pushed for constitutional reform over the past decade. It was a major plank in my 1987 race for governor. But little has been done. All of your good government groups feel that major tax reform is necessary. . Put everything on the table. Obvious detrimental taxes (inventory tax, sales tax) need to be re-worked. But don't shy away from the homestead exemption and other sacred cows. This could be a strong signal that by revamping the tax structure, democrats are fighting for a better climate for business development.
5. Advocate that a commitment be made to wipe out adult illiteracy. We rarely hear that up to one-fifth of our population is functionally illiterate. Our emphasis has been on elementary and secondary education, but thousands of adults find it difficult to function because they just can't read. A committed Democratic Party can be an inspiration to show adult illiterates that you care, and you want to work with them to overcome their problem. At least once a month, on a regular basis, key Democratic officials could commit to teach classes for adult illiteracy throughout the state. The Party would receive tremendous and positive publicity and could accomplish a great deal towards encouraging our large illiterate population to deal with this serious problem. The cost would be marginal, yet one could make an important symbolic step in dealing with a major barrier in our workforce.
6. Declare open warfare on the cost of prescription drugs. Louisiana has a high portion of its population using prescription drugs. We're just not as healthy, and have a high proportion of older adults. Yet the cost of prescription drugs is unaffordable to many of these citizens. Governor, you can do something about it. Maine has negotiated group discounts for its Medicaid population. The new governor of Illinois is making an effort to buy prescription drugs for state employees from Canada. If he is able to do this, the state will save 100 million dollars a year. Louisiana has a tremendous group to use collectively. State employees, both current and retired, as well as those citizens using the Charity hospital system give you a large group for negotiations. There are a number of ideas floating around right now. This is definitely a "good fight" to take on. And call for some creative thinking here by the next administration. We should consider following the Texas lead in authorizing a state-run website to help Louisianans buy prescription drugs over the internet from Canada. Thousands of Louisianans would love to have access to such a service.
7. Urge the next Governor and new Legislature not to waste their time chasing smoke stacks. Articles are appearing in the press that the next Governor should travel the world to bring in outside industry. Urge the new Governor to be careful here. It could be a loosing proposition. Alabama and Mississippi paid hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars to "buy" new jobs. If your talk to economists in those states, it really hasn't been cost effective. Taxpayers in those states will, in some instances, be paying off bonds for the next 50 years. It's just not worth the price. Mitch Landrieu said it well during his successful campaign for Lieutenant Governor in 2003. You grow jobs from within. We need more Louisiana Technology Parks similar to the one just formed in Baton Rouge.

We have the natural resources. You are the key to developing the technology that will create these new jobs within our own borders. It's much more cost effective.

Remember what the Republicans did back in 1994? The country was presented with a strong collective vision with a new document called the Contract with America. The Newt Gingrich gang vowed to reform Congress along with commitments to fiscal responsibility and personal accountability. Their thoughts were idealistic and rational. The Louisiana Democratic Party should do the very same thing. Set out a whole list of specific goals, and urge every Democratic candidate to support these proposals.

So Chris Whittington and company, there's an opening here for you. The Louisiana Democratic Party needs to overcome its own self-esteem problem. The Party needs to take the lead in bringing in its elected officials to put a contract together that shows imagination and takes risks. The Party needs to be aggressive in the James Carville style (although it may be best to let him stay in Washington), and start showing confidence.

Hey, I'm on a roll now. But quite frankly, it's easy to pick up on this. The challenge is out there, Louisiana Democrats. Either pick up the gauntlet, or look forward to being more irrelevant than you are now in the years to come.

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Democrats never agree on anything, that's why they're Democrats. If they agreed with each other, they would be Republicans. *Will Rogers*

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown

Jim Brown's weekly column appears each Thursday here at Politicsla.com, and in a number of newspapers throughout the State of Louisiana. You can read Jim's Blog, and take his weekly poll, plus read his columns going back to the fall of 2002 by going to his own website at <http://www.jimbrownla.com>.

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