

POINTS OF VIEW

Democrats need to figure out how to involve others

The caller was a well-known columnist for a Detroit daily newspaper.

"Things can scarcely get worse for the Democratic Party," he started off. "First, Fieger gets whopped by Engler. Then Democrats lose the House and their working majority on the Supreme Court. Come New Year's, the Republicans will be in control of the entire apparatus of state government. When are ordinary people going to take the party back from the UAW?"

Good question. It's especially good because the folks atop organized labor in Michigan continue to refuse to speak to reporters from either Detroit daily newspapers on the grounds that the newspapers conducted unfair labor practices in winning the strike. "No scab newspapers" conveniently means not having to answer potentially embarrassing questions from

curious reporters.

Those Democrats who do speak to reporters are generally unanimous in asserting that their party needs to be "revitalized," a code word meaning enlisting the organized labor's stranglehold. Non-labor party activists have been complaining for years that organized labor would rather control the party apparatus top to bottom rather than share power and win elections.

It was not always thus. Way back in the 1950s, Democratic Party Chairman Neil Staebler, Gov. G. Mennen Williams and UAW President Walter Reuther worked out a kind of collective leadership for the party. Organized labor had a seat at the table, to be sure, but other groups — blacks, women, farmers, even business and professional people — also sat in. Decisions might be contentious, but no one group dominated.

It worked. Democrats experienced



PHILIP POWER

great success for more than a decade.

Then gradually for organized labor and especially in the UAW, the idea got around that it was more "responsible" for labor to run things directly without going through the inconvenient process of consultation.

The traditional way political parties reach conclusions is by holding conventions. But organized labor still dominates party conventions.

One method might be to adopt a

system used in England to great effect by Tony Blair while he was wrenching the Labor Party out of the thrall of organized labor and converting it into a successful, middle class party.

The Labor Party operates through conventions, and something called the Parliamentary Labor Party, consisting of all Labor Members of Parliament. Unlike the British trade unions, Labor Party MPs have a common and compelling interest in winning elections.

Maybe Michigan Democrats should hold a convention of all elected Democratic officeholders. Their overriding common bond — an interest in reforming the party so as to win elections — would provide them a good starting point to analyze what's going wrong with the Democratic Party. Their collective standing as Democratic officeholders might immunize

them against retribution by organized labor.

Moreover, many Democratic Party officeholders are themselves members of unions. Their presence at a convention would serve as proof that, as a practical matter, any move to reform the Michigan Democratic Party must include organized labor as an important part of the coalition.

For years now, organized labor has been at the center of the Michigan Democratic Party. The problem is that it has been a center without any circumference. Figuring out how to include other folks in is the essential first step in any process of reform.

Phil Power is chairman of Home-Town Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@er

Spouse to city's second top banana bids goodbye to glitz and glamour

People rarely pause to consider the valuable behind-the-scenes work performed by the spouses of elected officials. But just as Vicki Barnett's highly productive term as mayor pro tem of Farmington Hills comes to a close this month, so does my considerably less illustrious term as the city's second spouse.

Not that residents will notice much. In fact, early on, my son had irreverently taken to calling me the "Fourth Banana." When first asked why, this apple of my eye replied with typically impeccable eighth-grade math logic, "You're the second banana to the second banana!"

This never fails to crack him up. My term as the Tipper Gore of this not-so-banana republic has been, to continue mixing fruit metaphors, a veritable bowl of cherries. While Mayor Pro Tem Barnett immersed herself in the nitty gritty of city economic development, traffic congestion, oil wells and sewage disposal, I

plunged heading into the heady life of an MPT's spouse: the state dinners, the endless procession of stretch limos in the driveway, the mayor's kitchen cabinet meeting — literally — in the kitchen, the glitterati, the paparazzi ... Ah, life in the fast lane of Farmington Hills!

OK, OK, so I exaggerate a tad. Actually, life this past year has been anything but glitz and glamour, more like life in a fish bowl than in a fast lane. Residents routinely stop me at the supermarket or Harrison High football game to share a zoning, cracked sidewalk or other problem. "Just ask Vicki," they invariably urge.

And I do. Vicki eats this stuff up. Consequently, our pillow talk has become rather drab of late — and certainly much less exciting than Bill and Hillary's, or even All and Tipper's. Those nocturnal sweet nothings somehow turn into discussions of sour gas wells or trash removal. Even our coffee table, once a prized reposi-

GUEST COLUMNIST



MARK STECKLOFF

tory of art, culture and faux sophistication, has now deteriorated to the point where its highlight is Solid Waste Technology magazine.

Of course, my term has not been entirely devoid of solid achievement. First, I managed, albeit barely, to not commit any major breach of diplomatic protocol at the Mayor's Exchange Day dinner with City of Petoskey officials. That was no small feat actually, considering that I, a non-drinker was

confronted, like Nixon in China, by at least five obligatory toasts to each city's delegation. After the fourth or fifth, I was seized by an impulse to hurl my champagne glass into Cafe Cortina's fireplace. But such unspeakable near-blunder was squelched in mid-launch by Vicki's quick thinking — and a gentle, but well-placed elbow to my rib. Alas, peace still reigns between our two great cities.

Even more important, like every self-respecting Fourth Banana, I successfully embarked upon a Project. You know — Tipper has her musical rating system. After much agonizing, I decided upon a project befitting my low station in municipal life.

SAVE THE REDSIDE DACE!

So it's not exactly the majestic blue whale in the boundless sea, but this tiny, unassuming critter, now found only in that glorified local ditch, the Seeley Drain, is literally our last-ditch defense against waste pollution from our upstream neighbors in Commerce

Township. You see, the effluence of Commerce's affluence pouring into the drain threatens the dace with extinction — a legal no-no.

So I undertook various efforts to popularize the cause, such as my proposal to make the redside dace the official fish of Farmington Hills.

I soon leave office to become, sigh, just another council member's spouse. Just one of a number of Sixth Bananas, if you will. There is some small regret — one year, after all, is hardly enough time to save an entire species. But I have come to see our mayor, mayor pro tem and city council for what they are: hardworking, dedicated and caring.

And I have finally learned the most important lesson of Fourth Bananaism, the essence of the job: No matter the problem, no matter how great or small the question ... Just ask Vicki.

Mark Steckloff, an attorney, is Vicki Barnett's better half.

TACYLILIER RILTYCALEI ILLITERACY

The number of lives affected by illiteracy is staggering. One out of every five Americans has difficulty reading and writing.* For them, life can feel like an endless series of obstacles.

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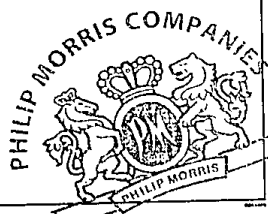
That's why Philip Morris Companies Inc. developed a learning program called Gateway: Paths to Adult Learning. By making the Gateway materials available at no cost to community organizations, Philip Morris provides an easy way for adult learners to take the first step to literacy—and the first step to a better life.

If you would like to volunteer to help someone, or if you know of someone who needs help, call 1-800-671-6200 for more information about Gateway, or contact your local literacy coalition.

* U.S. Department of Education, 1993.

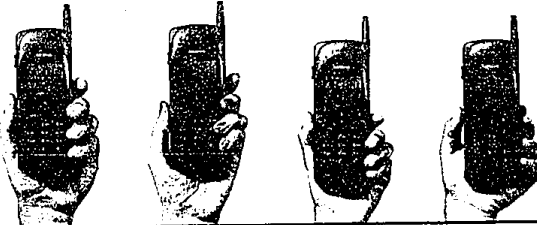
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