

## **JANET HOWELL: REACHING ACROSS THE AISLE**

By William Nicoson

“President Impeached!”; “President Acquitted!”; “Nuclear Test Ban Defeated!”; “Government Shut-Down Looms Again!” These days a glance at screaming headlines demonstrates we live in partisan times. Of course politicians are inevitably partisan in political campaigns. Once elected, some have difficulty switching primary allegiance from their party to the public. That’s too bad because, in government, partisanship is the enemy of accomplishment.

Janet Howell, the Democratic Senator representing most of Reston and all of McLean and Great Falls, understands the merits of reaching across party lines for allies on specific issues. I think that’s why her record of achievement during 8 years in office is so impressive.

Howell’s most unlikely triumph was securing support from down-state legislators for the authorization of transportation bonds to fund mainly projects in Northern Virginia. She argued that economic growth spurred by these projects would increase state revenue benefitting all taxpayers. Down-state Republican Senator William Wampler was a vital ally.

Among the issues important to Howell has been sanctity of the family. She championed legislation which established for the first time a statewide arrest policy in cases of alleged violence within the family: an officer may decline to arrest but only if justification of the officer’s decision is officially noted in the case record. Previously arrest policy varied widely throughout the state, including one locality requiring arrest only in the event of a family murder. In pursuing this legislation and Megan’s Law (requiring public notice of convicted sex offenders), as well as a law requiring notification of victims when a criminal is released from jail, Howell worked closely with Republican Senator Kenneth Stolle of Virginia Beach.

She also successfully pushed legislation mandating the reporting of child abuse and increasing sentences for crimes against children. In the battle to reduce evasion of child support obligations and to impose interest on arrearages, she consulted with Republican Delegate Vince Callahan.

Howell fought for and won anti-stalking legislation, broadening definition of the crime and increasing penalties. Her bill drew broad support from police and prosecutors, and she enlisted the close-to-home support of Republican Senator Bill Mims, whose district includes part of Reston.

Long ago Howell identified a neglected constituency: the mentally ill or retarded and the frail elderly. She documented the state’s antiquated facilities and under-trained staff serving the helpless, even while waiting-lists exceeded the population served. She has consistently pushed for increased funding and higher standards to close the “compassion gap”, as she calls it, and praises the collegial efforts of Republican Senator Jane Woods in this cause.

Even in partisan times, there is an apocryphal short-list of productive legislators whom numerous members of the other party would regret to see turned out of office – not merely as a matter of friendship but because the loss of convictions shared across the aisle might well impair future accomplishments. My guess is that Janet Howell would stand high on that list should it be miraculously revealed. In the meantime citizens of both parties who share her views and admire her achievements will vote for her next Tuesday.

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