

conservative Republican and another member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, talked about Neal's relentless efforts: "[H]e tried a humorous approach. He tried an angry approach. He tried to appeal to our sense of justice and our empathy. I mean, I come from a heritage of people that were pushed across the country, that lost home after home, that know what prejudice is. ... But it's through Sen. Neal's eyes that I appreciate now without this [holiday] we can't really communicate as well. There is suspicion. There is a prejudice that exists."

Neal was not always easy to predict. Though he voted for abortion, he seemed uncomfortable with the issue, once keeping a measure bottled up in a committee he chaired.

A 1977 right to die measure sponsored by Assemblymember Steve Coulter was approved by the Nevada Senate after Neal opposed it because "that means we're beginning to take life lightly." His colleague Richard Bryan defended it on grounds it "only allows someone to say that if he is ever incapacitated or comatose, that he does not want life-sustaining procedures taken."

Neal's best guide to his thinking was not his party or a label like *liberal*, but his occasional comment, "I speak to a need"—that, and the fact that the fixed star in his universe was those who were hurting. They were always his concern.

At various times, he sponsored legislation to create a state bank (an idea he got from North Dakota), requiring employers of 300 or more workers to provide child care, and requiring financial institutions to invest some profits in "socially beneficial projects."

He did not, however, have a good feel for the Senate hall. He was noted as long-winded—on at least one occasion, he spoke so long that a fed-up Senate finally halted his speech. He could give an effective five-minute speech and not be able to detect sentiment turning his way. Then he would keep talking until he started losing support.

In 1997, largely on the strength of his seniority, Neal became Senate Democratic leader. It was a poor fit from the beginning, almost a contradiction in terms. Neal operated best as an outsider using the institution's rules against it, and he alienated industries his fellow Democrats tapped for campaign money, particularly the casinos, which Neal wanted to tax at higher levels.

Even so, he might have succeeded in the role but for two members of his caucus—fellow Democrats Nick Horn and John Vergiels—constantly undercut him.

When Democrats gained the Senate majority, they undertook the delicate task of dropping their black leader and giving the job to Vergiels. In the same shift, Neal became Senate president pro tempore, in line of succession to the governorship, occasionally serving as acting governor.

Neal first talked about running for governor in 1973, when he threatened to run against incumbent Mike O'Callaghan, then made a short primary run in 1998. Then, when Republican



KNPB in Reno staged debates in the 2002 election. Here Democratic nominee for governor Joe Neal was seated next to an empty chair. His Republican opponent, Kenny Guinn, declined to debate him.

Gov. Kenny Guinn ran for reelection in 2002, Neal ran and won the primary, the first African American to win a nomination for governor in Nevada history. The Democratic Party's leadership promptly abandoned him.

The state's two Democratic U.S. senators, Harry Reid and Richard Bryan, set the pattern. Bryan's fig leaf was that he would not support Neal because he was soft on nuclear waste storage at Yucca Mountain—though, as Smith's book notes, when Bryan was governor, there were issues on which Neal was Bryan's only Senate ally. In addition, over the years, Bryan had supported plenty of Democrats with whom he disagreed on one issue. With Bryan and Reid over the side, other smaller fry such as the Democratic speaker of the Assembly also abandoned ship. It deeply angered black Nevadans. Neal, of course, lost to Guinn.

In that prescient column in Neal's first year, Menicucci wrote that Neal "often resort to tactics common to the right."

"Senator Neal believes that eventually we will have to deal with the problems addressed by his bills," he wrote. "In the meantime, debate will be stimulated and interest aroused. Much the same function is performed by Neal's lonely dissenting voice on heavily supported legislation. A minority opposition vote, while practically impotent, can alert the public that there is another side to a seemingly non-controversial issue."

That was pretty much the way Neal's career unfolded. He did not often win first rounds, or even later rounds. And some things he never won, such as a hike in casino taxes. But after he broke the ground, he or those who followed him later sometimes won.

In an 1837 lecture, Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "They did not yet see, and thousands of young men as hopeful now crowding to the barriers for the career, do not yet see, that, if the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him." □

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