NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Tweedle Dee in Congress

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 29, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The Washington Post this morning [1]has a profile of an incoming GOP freshman, Rep.-elect Mike Kelly, who beat Rep. Kathy Dahlkemper in Pennsylvania?s 3rd Congressional District. The owner of a car dealership, Kelly?s public service resume included only part-time service on a town council, so it should not surprise that he is suspicious of Washington?s ways.

Kelly tells the Post that he has not met anyone in Washington who impresses him. Now, I confess, when I look at the GOP House caucus, I can understand the sentiment. (Sadly, the same can be said for many in the Democratic caucus too.) But, I invite the Congressman to come and meet some of my friends who are very impressive. He should go over to the Library of Congress and meet some very impressive scholars and librarians there. He should visit either of the two parishes on Capitol Hill and meet the impressive priests who live and work there.

But, what caught my eye were the sillinesses he said about his reasons for running. Kelly was upset because the new managers at GM told him he could no longer sell both Chevrolet and Cadillac. He said that before the government bailout and takeover of GM, managers from the previous management had visited his dealership and pronounced it ?perfect.? He was furious that the new managers came in and told him what he could and could not do.

What?s wrong with that picture? The old managers ? the ones who ran the entire company into the ground ? they were satisfied with his dealership. (He later acknowledges that he does not use a computer at his dealership, which makes me wonder how efficient his oversight methods are and how the previous managers thought such methods of oversight ?perfect.?) But, the government managers, deployed after the government used its money to save the company, they were the problem. Mind you, Kelly would be completely out of business, unable to sell either Chevrolets or Cadillacs if the government hadn?t bailed out GM. And, those horrible new managers have helped GM post a profit for the first time in memory. But, in the simplistic world of the Tea Party, such foolishness passes for wisdom.

I will stipulate that sometimes the ways of Congress make one question the wisdom of self-governance. But, if anyone thinks that businessmen are any better, they need to spend more time in business. To use Mr. Kelly?s words, in the seventeen years I ran a small business, I was only impressed by one businessman, my boss. Let me give a small, simple example. We were at a wine seminar in California circa 1988, a seminar led by some of the nation?s most successful restaurateurs. The whole theme of the seminar was the need to make wine accessible, to get beyond the fancy French labels and the precise knowledge of vintages, to get Americans thinking that wine is what they should have for dinner at home, which would only happen when they felt comfortable buying wine off the shelf without expert guidance from a sommelier. It was a really good seminar and at the end of it, they presented an award for ?best wine list? to a restaurant in Detroit that had a wine list thicker than a phone book that would induce trepidation in all but the most seasoned sommeliers. So much for being impressed by business acumen.

Mr. Kelly is in for a rude awakening I suspect. Some issues are complicated and demand nuance, and he does

not exhibit much in the way of nuance. He is already dismissive of the Congress he has not yet joined and which he spent $400,000 of his own money trying to get to. I am going to wager that Kelly and other freshmen Congressman will be one-termers because they will not want to run for re-election. The folk wisdom certainties they bring with them will run into the entrenched powers of DC ? and occasionally into the brute force of facts ? and the proud sensation of being an ?outsider? will fade as the novelty wears off and the outsider sensation will give way to feelings of loneliness and futility.

?I hope I don?t sound arrogant about this, but at 62 years old, I?ve pretty much seen what I need to see,? Kelly says. Those are the words of a self-satisfied man who believes his own myths about being a self-made man. I am glad I am not his neighbor or his relative. Those words are also the words of a man whose mind is dead. Among my two greatest mentors were Professor Paul Weiss and Msgr. John Tracy Ellis, both of whom were still teaching ? and teaching well because they were still learning - well into their eighties. Sorry, Mr. Kelly, but, yes, you do sound arrogant. Arrogant and not very smart.

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