

The Journal News • August 14, 2008

Kriss, Ryan should have remembered silence is golden



Phil
Reisman

This may be hard to believe, but once upon a time the people's business was adequately accomplished without cell phones - those nervous-making, hand-held instruments of unceasing, neurotic communication.

What on earth are the government functionaries yakking about on the taxpayers' dime and time? Some of it must be important. But let's face it, there's only so much you can say in a workday about county sewer and water treatment.

For instance, the cell-phone question is currently swirling around Gary Kriss, the beleaguered chief adviser to Bill "Boss" Ryan, whose penchant for wireless chatter may only be rivaled by that of a gabby prom queen before the big dance.

In Kriss' case, the "big dance" was Election Day 2007.

Between March and Nov. 6 of last year, Kriss, using a county-issued cell phone, had 39 conversations with Domenic Volpe, a Democrat who was engaged in a full-throttled effort to unseat Republican incumbent George Oros in a race for county legislator.

There's nothing inherently sinister about this, except for the strong suggestion that the loquacious duo might have been talking about more than just the weather and may have been discussing political strategy, which would've been a no-no for Kriss.

Boss Ryan said it himself in a Board of Legislators policy memo he issued in January 2007. Personal staff members, he said, were prohibited from performing "political work during the hours for which they are receiving Board compensation." He specifically said that staff members could not take part in any effort to unseat a county legislator.

Ryan himself had more than a few phone conversations with Kriss and Volpe on Election Day - and most of the calls were only two or three minutes apart, starting at 9:37 a.m. and ending at 11:47 p.m.

According to County Legislator Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers, the chairman of a special committee formed to examine Kriss' expenses, Volpe said his calls with Kriss were "somewhat political," which is like saying somebody is somewhat pregnant. Kriss, who is the subject of a criminal investigation, has been "on vacation," so reports of his whereabouts have been rarer than sightings of Judge Crater, Elvis and the Sasquatch.

For his part, Ryan said that he's known Volpe's family for more than 45 years and, though he couldn't recall the nature of his calls on Nov. 6, they weren't about the campaign.

Ryan then offered a rather startling political principle to The Journal News.

“I don’t know if that had anything to do with anything,” he said. “By Election Day, it (the campaign) is pretty much over.”

And here we thought Election Day wasn’t over until all the votes were cast and the polls closed at 9 p.m.

It’s especially startling when you consider how close the Oros-Volpe race actually was. Oros won by only a few hundred votes. The next day the incumbent compared his victory to surviving a tsunami.

Oros may have been partially referring to a slew of phone calls that were made five days before Election Day that had nothing to do with Kriss but with someone by the name of Carmella Schubert.

In essence, this is what happened: A Leesburg, Va.-based company specializing in automated campaign messages, known as “robo-calls,” screwed up their programming and mistakenly sent out pro-Volpe calls to a few thousand residents in Peekskill, Cortlandt and Yorktown at 2 a.m., instead of 2 p.m.

People who were awakened from sound sleep blamed Oros for the intrusion because the early part of the message delivered by the aforementioned Schubert mentioned only Oros by name and did not urge listeners to vote for Volpe until the very end. Oros initially denounced the mishap as a dirty Halloween trick, but the event had a special comic twist when it was revealed that Schubert was Volpe’s mother-in-law.

This only goes to show that robo-calls are just as much a menace to the health of county residents as cough syrup and trans fats. Robo-calls should be banned from local elections. (Don’t laugh. It’s just goofy enough to inspire a law.)

Also, politicians should keep their in-laws out of political battles. They just add an element of paranoia to everything.

As for Kriss and Ryan and all those cell phone calls to Volpe, well, there was nothing political about them. Right? After all, Ryan enjoys a supermajority on the board with 13 Democrats to four Republicans.

Knocking off Oros to make it 14-3 would be an unnecessary power grab. It would be blatantly partisan, an overkill of one-party rule that in recent years has served to foster a sense of arrogance in county government.

It would be against policy, too.

But then again, it would also be business as usual.

Reach Phil Reisman at preisman@thejournalnews.com or 914-694-5008. See more stuff at lohud.com/reisman.