

Utah's Democratic legislators deserve our appreciation



BARB GUY

The look in Scott McCoy's eye as he walked past the window between the Senate floor and the observation gallery broke my heart. I don't know the man - have never met him - but I really felt for him.

It was day 37 of the Utah Legislature's 45-day annual session and Senator McCoy, a rare Democrat in a sea of Republicans, was fighting a losing battle, something he probably does every single day the Legislature is in session.

Apparently catching the eye of an observer he knew, McCoy's face seemed to me to say, "I'm trying, but what's the point - look at these people!"

I readily admit that I might be projecting my own thoughts, but it's easy to see how someone like McCoy might feel such futility. Any non-Republican and/or non-Mormon might feel

expendable in Utah's legislative process.

In fact, it doesn't take an outsider to notice that. A charming Mormon Republican friend wondered aloud the other day if his friends on the Hill wouldn't be happier if all the Democrats would just go home. We decided many probably would, and that's shameful.

Instead, what seems to happen is many in the double-majority just go on as if no one else is around. Last Tuesday after a legislator introduced his mother during the Senate session, Senate President John Valentine nodded to the elderly woman and said, "Thank you very much, Sister." Church, the Senate floor - who can tell the difference?

Why would someone who clings to the dream of separation of church and state, someone in the minority in one or two or three important ways, voluntarily enter a world that most of us cringe and turn away from, the world of being "the other"?

After observing sessions, committee meetings, and other forms of sausage craft on Capitol Hill recently, I came away thinking that one of the most important things people in the minority can do is rally around their elected officials who are willing to wade in and serve on the Hill. We should be paying

attention to their forays into hopelessness. We should be sending thank-you notes and flowers and making friendly phone calls.

Patrice Arent impressed me by endeavoring to explain to her fellow senators that a \$100 million reduction in education funding is a bad idea (a tax cut that relies on slashing \$100 million in revenue to the Uniform School Fund).

She said she didn't see the outcry in favor of it. She said what she hears from constituents is not that they want \$100 million removed from education, but that education is hopelessly underfunded and our leaders continue to be frustratingly oblivious. Or something like that. I might be projecting again. Thanks to Arent, McCoy, and my own senator, Karen Hale, for voting against a dumb tax cut.

Over on the House side, in an education committee meeting, 11 Republicans and four Democrats heard testimony from members of the community about gay-straight alliance clubs in high schools. I noticed the testimony against the clubs was mainly from conservative interest-group people like Paul Mero (of the Sutherland Institute) and Gayle Ruzicka (of the Eagle Forum).

An Eagle Forum "marriage-family therapist" knocked the

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wind out of people with this preposterous, hilarious, infuriating piece of balderdash: "The gay community has a saying: We cannot reproduce so we must seduce."

I also noticed the testimony in favor of the alliances was from people who have direct experience with the clubs. For one thing, they had actual students, something lacking among the opposition. Kids, teachers, and parents spoke, extolling the clubs as life-saving groups that are not about sex but safety, friendship, and acceptance. Thank you notes to Reps. Duane Bourdeaux, James Gowans, Carol Spackman Moss, and LaWanna Shurtliff for getting it.

In a House session, a representative went entirely too graphic in describing his own bout with restaurant-induced food poisoning, using the unenlightened characterization "Montezuma's revenge" and asking for closer scrutiny of "ethnic restaurants." I was proud of my own representative, Ross Romero, who rose to ask if all restaurants would be inspected, or just ethnic ones.

Being a Democrat in Utah's Legislature is probably like being a member of the Jamaican bobsled team: The odds are huge against you and no one can imagine why you're there. For being hopeless, the Jamaicans got a heartwarming movie made about them - Utah's Democratic legislators probably won't.

As this year's legislative session ends, it would be nice if they at least got some thank-yous from the people they represent.

Barb Guy is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.