

June 13, 2009

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Mr. Dodd's Best/Worst Year

By [GAIL COLLINS](#)

Big week in Washington, what with final action on the tobacco regulation bill, under the leadership of Senator Christopher Dodd.

Congress has really been on a roll. Remember how they passed that consumer credit card bill under the leadership of Senator Christopher Dodd and the Helping Families Save Their Homes Act sponsored by Senator Christopher Dodd? There is, of course, still so much to do. We're hoping for a strong health care bill like the one co-written by Ted Kennedy and Senator Christopher Dodd. And the Obama plan to create a new agency to protect consumers of financial products. It got a big boost Friday when it received the strong support of the banking committee chairman, Senator Christopher Dodd.

What is it with this guy? Are they running out of senators or something?

I first met Dodd long ago, when he was in the House of Representatives. He was very funny, and seemed exceptionally normal for a member of Congress. Then I left Connecticut, and the next time I saw him he had moved to the upper chamber, acquired a mane of gray hair, a deep, senatorial voice and a demeanor so old school that I felt like apologizing for failing to bring along a baby for him to kiss.

Ironically, at this rather remarkable moment of legislative overachievement, Dodd is in political hot water back home in Connecticut. He's running for a seventh term, behind in the polls and facing a possible primary.

The trouble began with Dodd's presidential campaign when he famously attempted to win over the voters in the Iowa caucus by moving his entire family to the state and enrolling his daughter in an Iowa kindergarten. Iowa, you may remember, responded enthusiastically and awarded him nearly 1 percent of the vote. Connecticut was mortified.

Dodd has also had a string of ethical issues — an allegation that he got favorable treatment on a mortgage, questions about a vacation house in Ireland. Even as we speak, there is a new report on the wires pointing out that his wife sits on the board of directors of several health companies. These are all regrettable, but given the fact that after nearly 25 years, he is still one of the poorest members of the Senate, I think we can work under the assumption that he is not in it for the money.

During the bank bailouts, he was blamed for protecting the A.I.G. executives from bonus payment caps. This is deeply ironic since Dodd was one of the very few people in the Senate to show any interest whatsoever in salary caps until the cameras came on and our elected representatives began frothing with

rage and demanding to be allowed to beat leaders of the financial industry with brooms and sticks.

Dodd's role was complicated, but at bottom, the A.I.G. charge was so unfair that we can only hope he did something really, really bad at some previous point in his career and got away with it, thus balancing the scales of justice.

The more serious complaints involve the Senate banking committee. Being chairman is pretty much like putting up a billboard saying "I intend to raise massive amounts of political contributions from the financial services industry." Also, Dodd fell into the deregulation love affair that Washington was conducting in the 1990s. And whether or not he could have done much to forestall the financial industry's skid into disaster, his critics note that it would have been nice if he had been in Washington thinking about it rather checking out preschools in Iowa.

On the other hand. ...

While Dodd was busy watering down bankruptcy laws, he was also establishing himself as a leading progressive voice on a raft of other issues.

He resisted the siren call of Republican tax cuts in the Reagan and Bush administration. He was a persistent champion of quality early child care — an issue whose importance is matched only by its complete and total lack of vote-getting or donation-collecting potential. He authored the Family and Medical Leave Act. And he developed a close working relationship with his ailing friend Ted Kennedy, who designated Dodd as his surrogate on the health care legislation. In Kennedy's absence, there is really no other Democrat in the Senate with so much ability to reach across the aisle and negotiate with Republicans while still keeping his eyes on the prize.

Like most seasoned political animals, Dodd's response to his plummeting polls is to Do Stuff. Run around your home state. (He had a listening tour!) Make a splash in Washington. (Four bill-signing ceremonies in four months!) Find new ways to reach out to the masses. (Oh, Lord! He's Twittering.)

Meanwhile, by his estimate, he spent 30 hours this week alone talking with Republican senators about the health care bill. On the phone, he sounded exhausted, but you can tell he sort of loves it. "It's what I do," he said.

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