

# Hampshire Life: U.S. Rep. Silvio O. Conte's legacy as Republican moderate

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One day in October 1990, Silvio Ottavio Conte - a month from winning his 17th election in the 1st Congressional District and four months from being felled by complications of prostate cancer - granted his umpteenth newspaper interview.

"I think people feel we're part of a family - Democrat, Republican or whatever," Conte, a Republican, told a reporter for The Boston Globe.

Not everyone in Congress was celebrating that family feeling.

Even then, the "whatever" ranks were thinning.

Conte, a nimble deal-maker from a working-class Pittsfield family whose independence made him a party of one, was coming under pressure from "young Turks" on the Republican side, chief among them Georgia Rep. Newt Gingrich. They wanted him out of leadership positions and felt that only by sharply defining Republican values could they wrest control of the House.

By 1990, more than three decades after western Massachusetts sent him to Congress, Conte was using his power as ranking minority member on the Appropriations Committee to embody bipartisanship.

The fact that Conte stood astride the congressional cash register no doubt helped. "Being in that position," he told the Gazette in 1985, "they can't carry a grudge."

A generation later, party lines and grudges seem to rule Capitol Hill.

"He could not survive in the present Republican Party," said U.S. Rep. John Olver, the Amherst Democrat who has represented the district since Conte's death. "He would have found it so uncomfortable in the Washington scene."

"Just imagine what they would do to Silvio Conte," said Jonathan "Jay" Healy of Charlemont, a former Republican state representative and state agriculture commissioner. "It wouldn't be pretty."

Fewer and fewer people remember Conte's example in Congress. It was a legacy his friend Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, the Democratic speaker of the House, once declared, with perhaps a eulogist's license, as historic. "If the Founding Fathers came back and picked from our 200-year history one member of Congress to show how they intended the Congress to work," O'Neill is said to have told the lawmaker's widow, Corinne, "they would have selected Silvio Conte."

U.S. Rep. Ed Markey said of Conte, "When you look up the word bipartisan in the dictionary, his picture is next to the word."

Lest that legacy be forgotten, it is worth asking: How did Conte earn such praise? And how should he be remembered?

Across the region, people who follow politics are mixed about whether a man like Conte, in today's fractious Beltway politics, would be the windshield or the bug.

In today's divided Congress is there even room for a moderate Republican like Conte?

U.S. REP. RICHARD Neal, the Springfield Democrat, recalls mentioning Conte during a visit last month with seniors in Pittsfield, whom he seeks to represent under redistricting. "There were nods of approval," Neal said.

While older residents of the 1st District remember Conte, it would be hard to get their grandchildren to grasp how this politician was able to remain viable as the only Republican member of the Massachusetts Congressional delegation.

Or how he ran several times as both a Republican and a Democrat. "If you tried to explain that to a political science class, they'd think you were talking about the Magna Carta," said Neal. And they'd be right to reach for a calendar. A generation on, the world Conte maneuvered in is gone.

There are fewer Southern Democrats in Congress and fewer Northern Republicans like Conte, people who, as moderates, added a fluidity to the political culture and served as the system's shock absorbers. They encouraged collegial debate. "Card games and an occasional beverage and a cigar were the order of the day. Because Democrats and Republicans socialized when I went to Washington and that is nonexistent today," Neal said.

Matt L. Barron of Chesterfield, a political consultant, says the socializing came naturally to Conte, whose gregariousness helped magnify his clout. "Congress did more work back then because they were not running home on Thursday afternoons for weekends of fundraising," Barron said in an email interview. "Members and their families got to

know each other ... It was not like the armed camps we see today, where liberal Democrats and conservative and Tea Party Republicans lay land mines in each other's path."

Jane Swift, the former Massachusetts governor and a Republican, says she owes a lot to Conte, who tweaked his policy of not endorsing candidates in state races when she ran for the state Senate in 1990, a year before his death. The Friday before Swift's election, Conte arranged a newspaper photo in North Adams that showed him handing Swift a check - and implicit in that, his support.

"He definitely loomed large," Swift recalled in an interview from her family's horse farm in Williamstown. "My romantic self would hope that had he lasted, he would have prevented the worst of what has happened. ... I would hope that his example would inspire current elected officials to act more like him. He had a kind word for friend and foe. He represented a different era."

For a 1997 biography of Conte, the late Peter E. Lynch examined the lawmaker's ability to bring people together. "He would sit at a committee meeting and pull out the elements to forge a coalition," Lynch told Jim Kaplan of Northampton for an essay that appeared in the Gazette in 1999. "Congress sure could use him today," Kaplan wrote 13 years ago.

THE TIPPING POINT away from bipartisanship may have come nearly four years after Conte's death on Feb. 8, 1991. With Olver settled in to Conte's old seat, Gingrich consolidated his advance by taking the speaker's post, riding a wave of Republican victories in the 1994 midterm elections.

"He really was the guy who set the fire," Neal said. "Gingrich fundamentally changed the way we talk to each other.

"Silvio would have had a difficult time with Speaker Gingrich."

By 1990, Conte was breaking ranks and voting with Democrats 70 percent of the time, according to a news story from that period. He sided with President George H.W. Bush in a budget dispute, but disagreed with his party often during the Reagan presidency, 1981-1989. A Congressional Quarterly report in 1982 found that Conte backed positions taken by Reagan 52 percent of the time, compared to 64 percent for all House Republicans.

Jeffrey Ciuffreda of Williamsburg, a former aide to Conte, says he thinks often of what might have been - had his old boss been there in Washington when Gingrich ascended to the speaker's post with the 104th Congress. "I always say I would have loved to see that battle. ... He would form relationships with people, rather than stay on one side of the aisle. You could make decisions together. That was his compass. Now, that's almost not allowed by the party leadership."

Ciuffreda says Conte once explained to him that he remained loyal to the Republican Party because it had given him a chance to run initially. Conte's essential Republicanism, in Ciuffreda's view, resided in his belief not in an overarching ideology, but in an individual's ability to seize upon opportunity and advance.

"He was a wrong and right kind of guy," said Ciuffreda, "not a left and right."

Olver puts it a little more bluntly. "He was never a Republican in the first place," he said.

Democrats in Berkshire County had told a young Conte, fresh from attending law school on the G.I. Bill, that he'd have to wait his turn to seek office. "He gave them the finger and went off to the Republican Party, and they were happy to have him," Olver said.

"He'd definitely be a Democrat," adds Healy, the former Republican lawmaker, who left his party a decade ago and is now state director for rural development for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "The values he embodied were 180 degrees opposite what we see in this perpetual war between Republicans and Democrats."

Conte always had Democratic friends. Patrick M. Goggins of Northampton, a lifelong Democrat and former City Council president, once joined with other Hampshire County political leaders to support Conte after a Democratic challenger one year suggested the congressman was the subject of an FBI investigation. Though they belonged to different parties, Goggins admired Conte's work and feels today's national political life is diminished because it lacks Conte's knack for shaping compromises.

"People like Silvio Conte are sorely missing from the equation in terms of coming to grips with the problems that face the country ... and working it out," Goggins said. "These things just don't happen over party lines anymore. It's very frustrating to be an observer of that - and the consequences for the country."

CONTE WASN'T BASHFUL about his determination to hold office. Charles DeRose, former co-publisher of the Gazette, recalls running into him at an event. He told Conte that a friend's brother planned to challenge him in the next election. Conte's response: "Well, you tell that son of a bitch that he'll know he was in a fight."

In September 1982, Conte received nearly 10,000 write-in votes in the Democratic primary, setting the stage for him to run unopposed for the eighth time since his 1958 election. Mary Wentworth of Amherst, an actual Democrat, came in behind Conte in that primary, also as a write-in. "That didn't go down very well with the public," she said of Conte's maneuver to gain backing from both parties.

As someone trying to unseat a powerful incumbent Republican, Wentworth says she grew accustomed to hearing this refrain: "Silvio is a Republican, but that's as good as having a Democrat." The challenge Wentworth faced was convincing voters parties mattered. In her view, Conte's Republicanism allied him with forces that sought to benefit businesses and the wealthy. "He probably would not go to the lengths that

Republicans have gone to in the present to maintain such a disparity, because he grew up pretty poor," she said.

Republicans still proudly count him as one of their own. "I wish we had him back," said Paul Walker of Northampton, former leader of the Greater Northampton Chamber of Commerce. "He was a great man. He was an honest man. He had my interests at heart. He had Northampton's interests at heart - and most of his district."

Conte's model of independence may not be entirely lost. Jay Fleitman of Northampton, who unsuccessfully sought the Republican nomination to challenge Neal in the 2010 2nd Congressional District election, observes that 20 years later Sen. Scott Brown occupies a position similar to that of Conte. Brown "gets hammered by the conservative Republicans, even in Massachusetts," said Fleitman, a Gazette columnist. "However, he does live in that middle ground." Fleitman says that a Republican hoping to win election today in Massachusetts or anywhere in the Northeast would have to replicate Conte's political qualities. It is hard to negotiate toward the middle, Fleitman notes, "without getting a lot of flak."

John Andrulis of Northampton, an emeritus professor at Western New England University in Springfield who serves on the Hampshire County Republican State Committee, believes Brown, like Conte before him, understands that to represent a state like Massachusetts, he cannot be a party-line voter. "He's trying to appeal to all the people, which he has to do to win the election outright this fall. You could compare Scott Brown and Silvio Conte in that way. Though they have their own beliefs, they're willing to work with the other party. They're pragmatic."

DeRose notes that Conte and Tip O'Neill, great pals, lived in a world that allowed them to be friendly foes. "They would fight like crazy during the week and on Thursday nights they and their wives would play bridge. There's a metaphor - bridge - that's so missing today.

"Today you don't have compromise, you have embattled situations. It was a very different time," DeRose said. "While Conte could be partisan, he was also willing to compromise. People today aren't so willing. What he was that is missing today is that he was a moderate Republican. It's missing in both parties."

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