

John Norquist: Casting a Giant Shadow

The nation's image of Milwaukee has suffered some tough blows in recent years. The horrifying revelations of the Jeffrey Daummer case would have damaged any city's image to the outside world. When that story finally began to fade this spring, the city's water supply turned bad and the rest of the country was entertained by the news media with pictures of Milwaukee residents lining up to pump drinking water from wells in neighboring, unaffected communities. Finally there's the Brewers and the Green Bay Packers (who play some of their home games at County Stadium). There hasn't been much to write about in the last half dozen years or so.

But recently one subject has begun to attract some positive press from the rest of the nation's journalists: Milwaukee's young and decidedly different kind of mayor, John O. Norquist. Part of that applause is naturally due to Norquist's sure handling of the Daummer and other public relations disasters.

Now one year into his second four-year term, the 43-year-old Norquist is

variously described as blunt, idealistic, sarcastic, funny, complex, introverted, and a manipulator. He served 13 years in both houses of the Wisconsin legislature, having been elected for the first time when he was only 25 years old. He left state government to succeed Milwaukee's long-serving mayor Henry Maier in 1988. A year ago he received endorsements from both of Milwaukee's major dailies on his way to garnering 63% of the vote.

A life-long Democrat, Norquist belies the traditional image of a free-spending liberal. He has instituted strong-mayor, cabinet government, cleaned up City Hall, and reduced the city bureaucracy. Property taxes have gone down every year he's been in office, at the same time as he has been able to attract more state aid. Spending on city services has increased to be sure, but at a rate lower than inflation. Like all major urban areas in the United States, Milwaukee still has problems, ranging from violent crime to the plight of the homeless. But Norquist is receiving kudos from a number of non-



partisan observers for trying to do something about them.

Besides his other reforms, there is his plan for Milwaukee's future social and educational life, the ambitious Focus Milwaukee: Seven/2000 project which calls for significant improvements in seven areas of urban life, ranging from public safety to job creation. One of his special interests is the environment, a natural consequence, no doubt, of his marriage to Susan Mudd, executive director of Citizens for a Better Environment. Another passion is free trade, an issue that has led him to lock horns with protectionist politicians in his own party.

John Norquist's background is 100% Swedish. His mother's parents, Gustav Nelson and Ulrika Enander, came from Allstakan in Värmland and his father's parents, Ernest Norquist and Josie Magnusson, were born in Brunflo in Jämtland and Karlstad in Värmland, respectively. His father, Rev. Ernest Norquist, is a retired Presbyterian minister.

Looking at the mayor—who stands 6'7" tall—it's easy to say that he stands head and shoulders above all other politicians. But his growing reputation for firm, responsible government, coupled with his genuine concern for improving his constituents' physical and social environment, will inevitably lead to the nation's journalists turning that pun into an overused cliché.



Mayor Norquist lends a hand painting over some graffiti. [Photo: Mayor's Office, Milwaukee]

SWEDEN & AMERICA, Swedish Council of America, Summer 1993. Contains some errors, e.g. he is not 100% Swedish, but part Norwegian and Danish.