

# The Senator Without Guile

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Proxmire of Wisconsin

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Political Views,

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By RALPH NADER

Will this country ever again see the likes of a Senator from Wisconsin-William Proxmire-who passed away this month at age 90? He came to the Senate, replacing Senator Joseph McCarthy, in 1957 and left in 1989. He was the legislators' legislator. No one worked harder, studied more, listened to more Congressional witnesses or cast more consecutive votes in the Senate without being absent.

Except for his championing the dairy farmers-whom he considered just about the hardest working farmers in America-he was fiercely independent, unconventional and fearlessly challenged the entrenched customs of the Senate. Whether taking on the sacred cow of regular Senate pay raises or conducting a lone 16 hour filibuster or campaigning by literally walking thousands of miles around his state-taking one day jobs like collecting garbage to get a feel for what ordinary workers go through, he was one of a kind.

Who else could be re-elected with landslides in a politically divided state again and again without spending, raising or taking any campaign money? Zero. He would spend a couple of hundred dollars for postage stamps to send back unsolicited checks for his campaign.

Who else would make 3,000 speeches to the Senate over a period of 19 years to force a vote to ratify an anti-genocide treaty? Almost every morning. Three thousand speeches! Don't you think that's determination? As now, in those years there were many Senators with the attention of a humming bird.

He was the go-to Senator against big corporate welfare proposals, such as the federal bailout of Lockheed, the go-to Senator against corporate tax loopholes, the go-to Senator for measures to protect consumers financially like the truth-in-lending law.

As a senior member and then chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, he championed low and middle income housing legislation and supported the creation of the Consumer Cooperative Bank. When he became chairman of the Banking Committee-traditionally a lucrative watering hole for the big bank lobbyists-he refused a delegation of large New York and California bank executives for their traditional orientation. No, he would not see them privately, he said. He would be pleased to see them at a public Committee hearing. They could testify on a bill and he would be glad to hear their views.

Residents in northwest Washington, D.C. became accustomed to Bill Proxmire jogging five miles to work every day, after rising at 6 am and doing three hundred pushups. He popularized physical fitness, by example and by his writings, before it became more widely the thing to do.

His greatest regret was supporting the Vietnam War in the early years, unlike his great colleague, Senator Gaylord Nelson. But by 1968 he reversed course and became an opponent.

His greatest triumph, he said, was passage of the anti-genocide treaty.

One day, two young men tried to rob him near the Congress. "Prox," as he was called, held them off until the police came and arrested them. So what did Proxmire do a little later? Without fanfare, he hired them to do some chores in his Senate office.

Whenever his Senate colleagues were on foreign junkets during Senate recesses, Proxmire would hold significant hearings all by himself. It didn't harm his popularity to be seen as working on the people's necessities while others strayed or played.

Senator Proxmire was good for consumer protection, the environment, worker safety, small farmers, fair taxation and efficient government. At times he would rebuff labor unions and women's rights groups because of honest disagreements with them. As former Congressman Kastenmeier said the other day: "He was incorruptible."

He could be that because he believed that the folks back home were his "bosses," as he called them while doing all those short-term jobs around the state. Former Wisconsin Governor Tony Earl put it well, when he said:

"[Proxmire] made the case that personal contact and keeping in touch with the voters was a lot more important than how much money you had. We could sure use a lot more of the frugality today."

The Democratic Party, given its failure to achieve so many electoral victories at all levels of government, would do well to study the political stands of Senator William Proxmire and why he was elected in landslides again and again. The Proxmire formula for the Democrats could be a winning one throughout the country, not just Wisconsin.

I have always believed Proxmire could have won in any state. Meetings in the Senator's office were unlike any meetings I have had with other members of Congress. First, he listened intently and had a conversation with you. No glazed eyes.

He didn't talk like a politician—you know the strained oratorical or practiced phrases types. He was a man without guile. He focused on the issues and their relevance to the public interest.

Proxmire fans should move quickly to establish a dynamite memorial so that his style of politics and determination can be taught to a younger generation.

Ralph Nader is author of *The Good Fight*.