

Karofsky, Kelly trade barbs in Milwaukee debate

Posted on Friday, Mar 13, 2020

Dane County Judge Jill Karofsky in a Milwaukee debate accused rival Daniel Kelly of hanging a “for sale” sign on the state Supreme Court, because his conservative donors know their influence has led him to side with them time and again.

Kelly fired back the suggestion was obnoxious, ugly and vile, charging Karofsky has repeatedly lied about him in their race for a 10-year term on the bench.

“My opponent has made the centerpiece of her campaign an ugly slander,” Kelly told a forum hosted Thursday by the Milwaukee Bar Association. “The entire rationale for it has been a lie. There is no basis for it.”

But Karofsky pointed to Kelly deciding to house his campaign in the state GOP headquarters as one of several signs that her opponent is beholden to partisan interests. She pledged if elected she would recuse herself from any case involving the state Democratic Party.

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“We need to make sure that when folks get to the court, that they know that the decision on the court is being made for one reason and one reason only, and that’s based on what the law is and not based on the money that’s come in during a judicial election,” Karofsky said.

The two have already had sharp exchanges in past forums over Karofsky’s charge that voters believe there is corruption on the court because Kelly sides with conservative interests each time he has an opportunity to do so.

She expanded that Thursday, pointing to Kelly opening the door to participating in a case that could deactivate the registrations of some 200,000 after he had recused

himself from earlier proceedings. She argued it was a “corruption in its purest form,” noting Kelly has appeared at political events with signs backing Donald Trump and has the president’s support. She said that suggests if Kelly gets back on the case, it will be as a favor to Trump, who faces a tight race in Wisconsin this fall.

“He may as well stand up and say, ‘I’ve got your back, buddy. I’m going to be there for you in November. Just keep me on the court,’” Karofsky said.

The case focuses on the registrations of voters who may have moved and failed to respond to a state mailing. An Ozaukee County judge ordered those registrations to be deactivated immediately, but the 4th District Court of Appeals overturned that ruling. The case has now been appealed to the state Supreme Court after Kelly had earlier declined to participate in a request for the justices to take the case directly rather than going through the appeals court first.

Kelly said he made that decision in the earlier proceedings to avoid participating in a case that could impact his own election. If the case is before the justices after April 7, there would no longer be a conflict of interest and therefore no need to recuse.

Kelly added justices have a responsibility to participate in any case unless there is a clear conflict and it was “preposterous” to suggest he should recuse if there isn’t one.

“If there is no reason to recuse, then I would not recuse,” Kelly said. “To suggest I should anyway suggests a misunderstanding of what the nature of the Supreme Court is and the responsibility of a Supreme Court justice.”

Kelly hit that theme repeatedly as Karofsky lobbed corruption charges at him, questioning whether she understands some of the issues she was raising and even if she understood what the word corruption meant.

He also mocked the idea that he was a partisan, saying if that were the case, he was doing the “worst job ever” as a campaigner, because he never tells anyone he will follow their politics and doesn’t “carry water” for anyone while on the court.

Karofsky fired back that former GOP Gov. Scott Walker appointed Kelly to the Supreme Court in 2016 precisely because he wanted someone to do the bidding of conservative interests.

“Scott Walker wanted someone who would carry the water of the right-wing special interests and the corporate interest in this state, and that is exactly what Dan Kelly has done every single opportunity he has had on the court,” she said.

Kelly said Walker never asked him his politics during the interview process, only his judicial philosophy.

“Now you’re just adding more lies to your prior lies. Now you’re lying about Scott Walker, too,” Kelly said.

Watch the debate:

<https://wiseeye.org/2020/03/12/milwaukee-bar-association--supreme-court-candidate-forum-2/>