

Kyle Herrig: As Wisconsin suffers, Ron Johnson looks out for himself

Posted on Tuesday, Aug 18, 2020

Lake Winnebago, in Southeast Wisconsin, takes its name from an Algonquin Indian phrase describing its distinct scent in the summer, when the water becomes murkier and the fish more densely packed. This summer, something stinks on the lakeshore — but it has nothing to do with fish.

Wisconsinites, like Americans across the country, have borne the brunt of the federal government's [inability to come up with a plan to contain](#) the novel coronavirus. More than 50,000 people have tested positive for Covid-19 across the state, and nearly 1,000 have died. Unemployment figures are [higher](#) than at the peak of the Great Recession, with no end in sight.

Amid all the suffering, one prominent resident of Winnebago County, which borders the eponymous lake, is not only unscathed but thriving: U.S. Senator Ron Johnson. While his constituents lost their livelihoods and their lives, Johnson made millions. And he did it while fighting against solutions to a pandemic that continues to target working Americans like deer in front of a Wisconsin hunting blind.

[On March 2](#), Johnson sold his stake in Pacur, his plastics company, for as much as \$25 million. The sale went through before markets began to sink but after senators received closed-door briefings on coronavirus. Johnson insists the timing was coincidental. He points to a letter from the Senate Ethics Committee, which also cleared Sen. [Kelly Loeffler](#) (R-GA) after she pocketed [more than \\$3 million](#) from post-briefing stock sales.

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This type of self-dealing may be accepted by Washington insiders, but it's the type of corruption that [voters loath](#).

Long before the pandemic began, Ron Johnson was using his Senate seat to champion provisions that protected his wealth and enhanced the value of companies like Pacur. He provided the deciding vote on the 2017 tax bill after successfully pushing to reduce the tax rate for “pass-through” companies, including Pacur. The same bill [boosted](#) the fortunes of private equity firms, like the one that [purchased](#) Johnson’s stake.

If Johnson [becomes defensive](#) about his finances, he becomes downright distraught when presented with legislation that might aid his constituents. As the pandemic worsened in [July](#), Johnson opposed spending more to help stimulate the economy and extending \$600 in unemployment benefits. In case the message wasn’t clear, Johnson called the financial lifeline to Wisconsinites, who presumably missed their invitations to closed-door briefings, a “[perverse disincentive](#)” for work.

Given that Johnson has built his entire political persona on the virtue of work, his hostility toward workers trapped by a pandemic might come as a surprise. His campaigns were rife with references to his parents’ [farm upbringings](#), his [minimum-wage job](#) as a teenager, and the business he built “[from scratch](#)” in Oshkosh, WI.

This contradiction makes sense when you realize that his rhetoric about himself [never reflected reality](#). Johnson, one of the Senate’s wealthiest members, didn’t make his fortune through bootstrap entrepreneurship. He made it by marrying [the daughter of a billionaire](#), Howard Curler — and made it even larger after winning a seat in the U.S. Senate.

Johnson didn’t start his own business. His father-in-law [set up](#) Johnson, along with his son, Pat Curler, at Pacur. For years, Howard’s company, Bemis, was [their only customer](#). This riches-to-riches story resembles President Trump’s more than anyone else’s in Oshkosh. In all, Johnson’s wealth has [likely doubled](#) since entering office, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics.

Johnson may have worked hard over the course of his career, but family connections and favorable policy made his fortune possible. Instead of acknowledging the role shortcuts played in his own success and offering hard-luck workers a helping hand, he offers condescending lectures.

Johnson doesn’t respect or understand working people enough to know that they don’t want a free ride — they simply want to earn a fair wage without risking their lives. In D.C., he isn’t using his power to help people battered by an unprecedented

pandemic, or to get to the bottom of the administration's botched response — the reason so many are out of work in the first place. Instead, he's using his power as chair of the Senate's primary oversight committee to cheerlead for debunked [conspiracy theories](#) and [curry favor](#) with Donald Trump.

Ron Johnson may not be on the ballot this fall, but his warped priorities are. Wisconsinites are seeing past the façade. Soon, they'll be demanding public servants who put the public interest ahead of their own.

-Herrig is the Executive Director of the Congressional Integrity Project