

Bill Kaplan: U.S. Senate candidate Tom Nelson fights for Wisconsin

Posted on Monday, Apr 4, 2022

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Outagamie County Executive Tom Nelson is running a grassroots populist campaign for the U.S. Senate. He is seeking to win the Democratic primary and run against incumbent GOP Senator Ron Johnson. Politics is stranger than fiction as Johnson had previously pledged in 2016 not to seek a 3rd term. No wonder so many voters are cynical. However, Nelson, the son of a Lutheran minister, has a unique background and is not running a cookie-cutter campaign.

Nelson was neither born with a silver spoon in his mouth nor acquired wealth through marriage. Critically, he has experience in governing as a state Assembly majority leader and serving as a county executive since 2011. He has won consistently in a rural area that swung from Obama to Trump. Nelson's appeal rests on his advocacy of bread-and-butter issues. He told Axios: "(The Wisconsin) voters we lost most were in small-town counties anchored by a paper mill or machine tool dye company." What to do?

Nelson has a laser-like focus on Wisconsin's middle-working class. Case in point. The MJS reported that Oshkosh Defense sought to manufacture U.S. postal delivery vehicles at Foxconn's empty one million square-foot "advanced manufacturing facility." However, Foxconn refused to lease the empty building. Why? What flag does Foxconn fly? Shamefully, Oshkosh Defense moved the work to low-wage South Carolina. Regular folks in Wisconsin, hoping for good-paying union jobs with benefits, lost out. And, all the while Senator Johnson did not lift a finger to keep those jobs in Wisconsin. In a "let them eat cake" statement Johnson said: "It's not like we don't have enough jobs in Wisconsin."

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Nelson rebuked Johnson and the “botched Foxconn-Oshkosh Defense postal deal.” Johnson fully supported the “Foxconn boondoggle” paid for in state and local funding. But despite Trump’s calling Foxconn’s Mount Pleasant site the “eighth wonder of the world” nothing has been manufactured there nor did the promised 13,000 jobs materialize. Nelson denounced Foxconn’s refusal to lease to Oshkosh Defense, thereby facilitating moving the factory work and jobs out of Wisconsin. Nelson called for Congress to get to the bottom of this slap in the face to Wisconsinites.

Nelson said: “At a time when the United States is struggling to make investments in our workforce and in developing a coordinated national industrial plan that grows our economy while tackling the existential issue of global climate change (Nelson supports electric postal vehicles), understanding Foxconn’s and Oshkosh Defense’s treatment of public resources is vital for an informed public.” And, he criticized the fast-talking, uncaring Johnson: “It’s no surprise that Ron Johnson did nothing to help workers of Wisconsin and has no interest in why those jobs are going to South Carolina.”

It’s long past time to make Johnson live up to his pledge of no 3rd term. Nelson can make that a reality and represent regular folks. And, it helps that Nelson has a sense of humor, tweeting: “What is the difference between Ron Johnson and Ukrainians? Ukrainians defend their Capitol when it’s under attack.”

- Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.