

Defeat prompts Boozer to think of party change

*Says he would have won primary
and general if in as a Democrat*

BY LOU PANOS 9/24/98

The Jeffersonian

Stung but not disheartened by his loss in the Republican primary, Sen. Vernon Boozer says he is considering a switch to the Democratic Party.

"It's been suggested to me, and I'm thinking about it," says the veteran lawmaker from Towson.

Attributing his defeat to his abortion rights stance and to a low voter turnout, Boozer said in an interview he is happy with his 25-year record as a delegate and senator.

But Frank Kelly of Hunt Valley, a Democrat who made a similar decision after a similar defeat and is now a Republican, cautions Boozer against a precipitous decision on party-jumping.

He and Boozer also offered similar answers to an ironic question:

How can a Democrat and a Republican, both representing basically the same territory eight years apart and on opposite sides of the abortion issue, lose in their respective primaries?

"Because of the parties," says Boozer, who was never opposed by either Republican or Democrat in his Senate races.

"If I had run as a Democrat, I'd have won both the primary and the general elections this time," he said.

In last week's primary, he was defeated by Dr. Andrew Harris, a Cockeysville physician who out-pollied him by 593 votes out of 8,387 cast, or 53.54% to 46.46%.

Kelly, who was defeated in the 1990 Democratic primary by Janice Piccinini and months later re-registered as a Republican, said the apparent irony of his and Boozer's defeats is easily explained.

"I think it shows only that conservative Democrats like him have a

tough time in the Democratic primary and that liberal Republicans like Boozer have a tough time in the Republican primary," Kelly said.

Kelly said his leadership in an eight-day anti-abortion filibuster sharpened opposition to him in the 1990 election. He said Republican friends had urged him to change parties before the primary campaign ending his Senate career.

"I like Vernon very much, because he's a friend and nice guy, even though I disagree with him on abortion," Kelly said.

"But he lost not just because of the abortion issue. Andy Harris is competent and a physician, and he'll do a good job."

Harris's opponent in the General Election is Anthony O. Blades of Monkton, a first-time starter who was uncontested in the Democratic primary.

Kelly said Boozer should avoid major changes now.

"Vernon's got to do what he's got to do," the former senator said, "but my advice to him is, 'Don't make rash decisions. Take your time. There's life after politics.'"

Kelly, who served 12 years in the Senate, said he probably has "as much or more influence now than I ever did" then. Owner of a prosperous insurance firm, he is also a close friend and influential advisor to Democratic County Executive Dutch Ruppersberger.

Kelly said Boozer, who has been leader of the Republican minority in the Senate and is a senior partner in a successful law firm, "has had a great career and is a big guy."

As Senate minority leader, Boozer succeeded Sen. John Cade of Anne Arundel County, who died two years ago. He turned back a bid by Sen. Larry Haines of Carroll

County, who was unopposed in his own primary last week and made substantial contributions in money and volunteer workers to the Harris campaign.

Haines and Boozer were on opposites in the 1998 legislative session, when Haines championed a bill to ban so-called "partial birth" abortions.

The Harris camp portrayed Boozer as too liberal on such issues as gun control, pro-business legislation and drug needle-exchange, but Boozer criticized the zealotry of some anti-abortionists.

For example, he said, one of his campaign workers outside the polling place in the Idlewyde Community Hall was harassed by men placing pro-Harris bumper stickers on her bag and calling her "baby killer."

Notified of this, Harris said he not heard of the incident and added, "I certainly don't condone it."

"We instructed all our people to be very professional," he said. "Something like that is not our style, and I'll certainly look into it."

Boozer also cited pro-Harris campaign literature saying he missed a liquor board hearing for a strip bar he represented "because he was sightseeing with Bill Clinton." In fact, said Boozer, he was attending a historic General Assembly joint session being addressed by President Clinton.

Boozer also referred to Harris campaign literature saying Boozer's "supporters include the liquor industry, gambling interests and union" and his "clients include a tax evader, an exotic dance club and tattoo parlors."

"I don't want to be a sore loser, and I wish I could lift the telephone and call Andy Harris to congratulate him on a good campaign and offer to support him," Boozer said.

"But he crossed the line by saying things that were untrue about me, and I just can't do it."

During the campaign Boozer accused Harris supporters of "blatant lies" and Harris accused him of misrepresenting his record.

During the campaign and in the post-election interview, Boozer cited a statement that he had tried "to bring violent sex offenders into the district." This referred to a 1991 Boozer bill providing for treatment of such offenders in Maryland instead of sending them to expensive out-of-state facilities.

When an attempt was made to provide treatment for 26 of them at Sheppard Pratt Hospital in Towson, Boozer raised a protest leading to abandonment of the plan.

Asked about Boozer's post-election remarks, Harris acknowledged that there was obviously "misinterpretation" on some issues.

"But that doesn't mean that I think he didn't worked hard or that his public service shouldn't be commended," Harris said.

He described Boozer as "a good person who did what he felt was good for the district" and ran a hard campaign.

“That’s the way politics works,” Harris added. “People saw both sides, and they didn’t think he was voting the way they wanted.”

Harris said he would “like to feel that I also could pick up the phone and get advice from the senator ... and have a working relationship with him.”