

Painful Lessons for Vulnerable Incumbents

There is no question that incumbents who are out-of-touch with their constituents are very vulnerable during the 2010 election season. There are some dramatic examples in South Carolina and the Upstate.

Incumbent politicians who have had little opposition in the past and failed to take note that a large segment of the voting public has lost confidence in the leadership of both major political parties in Washington, D. C. and Columbia, S. C. are vulnerable to rejection by voters for the first time in their political careers.

Thousands of people at a Greenville Tea Party turned their backs on Third District Congressman Gresham Barrett and drowned out his speech with boos. That was a clear indication that the previously admired, traditionally conservative, Barrett would have trouble winning the Republican nomination for Governor of South Carolina. To his credit, he did not verbally attack the Tea Party movement or the elements that turned their backs on him. In fact, he usually made positive remarks about the movement. Since his defeat by Nikki Haley, he has not publicly blamed his defeat on others. That alone reflected well on his reputation as a Christian gentleman and all around "nice guy." He had voted for the Bush "TARP" bill and stood by his decision to do so throughout the campaign. There was nothing he could do that would erase that vote from the minds of voters.

Some of the longtime close friends of Fourth District Congressman Bob Inglis can't understand what happened to him since he returned to Congress almost six years ago. It was as if he had become a different man.

Inglis had been a very popular conservative representative in Washington during his first six-year hitch that ended with self-imposed term limits. He was not perfect, however missteps were overlooked even by his critics because his intentions were good and he was totally honest. Two years ago, he was challenged by three Republicans and forced into a runoff with an individual who was not well-known in the district and was easily defeated by Inglis. The Democrat challenger in the General Election was new in politics in a Republican dominated district.

The easy victory over the challengers may have given Rep. Inglis a false sense of security, because he continued to distance himself from the conservative base of his district. He frequently argued with constituents who were trying to give him good advice. He pursued compromise with Democrats who never compromise their liberal and leftist goals with conservatives. His public comments were sometimes hostile to the Tea Party movement, talk radio, FOX News and Glenn Beck, all of which were becoming more popular with Fourth Congressional District voters.

The easy-going conservative Congressman entered the 2010 Republican Primary campaign on the attack.

Four Republicans challenged Inglis in the primary election. Two of the candidates were backed by various Tea Party elements. A third was State Senator David Thomas, who appealed to the same

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Published Monday, 19 July 2011 10:49
HHS: 5401
Republican base that supported Inglis. The fourth was Trey Gowdy the popular Circuit Solicitor from Spartanburg. Gowdy was very strong among Republicans in Spartanburg County and appealed to Republicans across the board in Greenville County. It was clear that if Gowdy was in a runoff, Inglis was in trouble, because Gowdy was the only candidate who could count on the Tea Party vote that went to other candidates in the primary.

Trey Gowdy campaigned low key, but responded aggressively when verbally attacked by Inglis, who never changed his tactics or the issues on which he mounted the attacks.

Inglis is still our Congressman and will be for the next six months as will Rep. Barrett. We need them to help hold the line against the socialist onslaught by President Obama and his supporters.

A published interview since the election indicates that Congressman Inglis did not learn much from his election defeat. He continues to believe that talk radio and Fox News caused voter anger and will fade away with the Tea Parties, and he continues to believe that health care rationing and so-called "death panels" are a fabrication by Sarah Palin.