



Senator-designate Newman: Blank Slate

“She’s an empty vessel we can pour all our hopes and dreams in,” laughed former New Hampshire Speaker of the House Donna Sytek. But Sytek, who served with Newman on the board of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, had high praise for the Senate designee named to fill Gregg’s seat once the veteran Republican senator is confirmed as President Obama’s choice for secretary of commerce.



“I think she’s sensational. She’s a good thinker. She’s very articulate and she’s open-minded,” Sytek said. But indications of what that mind would be open to and what it might oppose were not to be found at the February 3 press conference, when Gov. John Lynch presented Newman as his choice for the Senate seat Gregg has held for the past 16 years. What she thinks about America’s role in Afghanistan or Iraq, the president’s economic recovery plan, or the Troubled Assets Relief Program remained a mystery.

“For example, where do you stand on abortion?” a reporter asked.

Newman declined to discuss the issue, saying only that she is a “sensible” and “reasonable Republican.” “I am careful to stay away from broad characterizations,” she said, while promising to consider each bill on its merits. “There are bills and there are bills,” she said, “and the devil is always in the details.”

One of the bills the new senator may have to consider is the “Freedom of Choice Act,” which would overturn and prohibit passage of any state or municipal laws that impose any limits on abortion, including parental notification laws or a ban on partial-birth abortions similar to the federal statute upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court. The bill’s ban on “discrimination” would also rule out the “conscience clause” in some state laws that allow hospitals or healthcare providers to refuse to perform or pay for abortions. No one yet knows if the soon-to-be junior senator from New Hampshire Newman would consider such a bill “sensible” or “reasonable.”

Lynch has been solidly in the “pro-choice” camp, both as candidate and governor. Last year, he lobbied for and signed a repeal of the state’s parental notification law. Last month he joined NARAL-NH in celebrating the anniversary of the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* ruling declaring a constitutional right to abortion. The governor also signed a bill last year establishing civil unions for same-sex couples.

Despite her long ties to the Republican party, Newman has been a campaign supporter of the Democratic governor and was co-founder of “Republicans for Lynch” when he first ran in 2004. She has also made campaign contributions to liberal, “pro-choice” Sen. Olympia Snowe of Maine and was an unpaid adviser to California Gov. Pete Wilson, a “pro-choice” Republican, during Wilson’s short-lived presidential campaign in 1995.

But she has also worked for a number of pro-life Republicans, including Gregg, who, as governor in 1989 and 1990, twice vetoed bills to take the state’s anti-abortion laws off the books. A volunteer in the Reagan campaign in 1980, Newman backed John McCain during the 2008 primary campaign and signed a letter in 2007 supporting the Arizona Republican as “the only candidate who can rally the Reagan



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on February 4, 2009

coalition of conservative Democrats and conservative independents needed to defeat the Democratic nominee in the general election next year.”

A Sociology major at St. Joseph’s College in Maine, Newman earned a Master’s in higher education at Penn State before becoming associate dean and later dean of students at the University of New Hampshire. She was appointed assistant secretary of commerce for economic development in the Reagan administration and was assistant to the president for management and administration for two years under the first President Bush. She has also been president of the Business and Industry Association of New Hampshire and executive dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. She was interim president of the University of New Hampshire when several of the state’s political leaders, including Lynch and Gregg, expressed outrage over a UNH professor’s claim that the 9/11 attacks were a conspiracy by our own government. While disassociating herself from the theory, Newman defended the professor’s right to present it in the classroom on the basis of free speech and academic freedom.

Newman is the latest in a long list of gubernatorial appointees to the Senate, following last November’s elections and subsequent presidential appointments. In Delaware, where Joe Biden won reelection to the Senate on the same day he was elected vice president, Gov. Ruth Ann Minner appointed Ted Kaufman, the former senator’s chief of staff, to hold the seat until the 2010 election, when Beau Biden, the vice president’s son and the state’s attorney general, is expected to run. The younger Biden is currently in Iraq with the Delaware National Guard.

Roland Burris has succeeded Barack Obama as Senator from Illinois, though the Senate initially refused to confirm his appointment by scandal-plagued Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who has since been impeached and removed from office. Former Denver Superintendent of Schools Michael Bennett was chosen by Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter to replace Sen. Ken Salazar, Obama’s choice for Secretary of the Interior. And New York Gov. David Paterson ended weeks of speculation over the Senate appointment sought by Caroline Kennedy and others when he named U.S Rep. Kirsten Gillibrand to fill the seat vacated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

The Newman appointment is unusual in that it crosses party, though not necessarily ideological, lines. Lynch agreed to appoint a Republican after Gregg said he would not accept the Commerce appointment if his departure would affect the balance of power in the Senate. Depending on the outcome of the still-contested race in Minnesota, another Democrat might have given the Democrats the 60 votes needed to cut off debate in a Senate filibuster. But Lynch assured everyone that New Hampshire Democrats would have a clear shot at an open Senate seat next year.

“Bonnie has assured me she will not run for the Senate in 2010 and that she will not support any candidates for the Senate in 2010,” the governor said at the press conference. Meanwhile, the new Commerce secretary will be busy selling features of the “Obama Spendorama” he warned about last fall to his former colleagues in the Senate. Gregg, despite his reputation as a “deficit hawk,” was successful last fall and again this year in persuading reluctant Republicans to support the \$700 billion bailout of large financial institutions with “troubled assets.” Perhaps some senators are now having second thoughts about it.

“If he wants to send more money to Wall Street fat cats,” Jeff Sessions (R- Ala.) told the *New York Times*, “I may not support him on it.”

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