

Friday, July 4, 2008

Progressive Democrats plan November summit

Miller: Party big enough for all views

by Alan Brody | Staff Writer

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ANNAPOLIS — When left-leaning Democrats staged a “Progressive Summit” in 2004, middle-of-the-road Democrats fretted that it could drive a wedge between the two factions and jeopardize the party’s chances of recapturing the governor’s mansion and widening their majority in the General Assembly.

Neither fear materialized as Democrats swept all four major races — governor, comptroller, attorney general and U.S. Senate — and increased their edge in the House of Delegates by six seats.

Four days after voters elect a new president in November, the progressive wing of the party will hold another summit at an as-yet-unknown location that may stir up some sour memories of the past.

“What’s wrong with like-minded people getting together and trying to find common ground and identifying best practices?” said Sean Dobson, executive director of Progressive Maryland, which is organizing the summit. “That’s just small-view democracy in action.”

In 2004, more than 500 Democratic activists and liberal elected officials used the summit in Columbia to energize party operatives and bash both President George W. Bush and then-Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. The party establishment was MIA, fearing the summit would do more harm than good. But organizers said it helped galvanize liberals and can do so again.

“I think it’s a good step because frankly the Democratic Party is a progressive party,” said Comptroller Peter V.R. Franchot (D), who conceived the 2004 summit.

“I think the fears that this would weaken the Democratic Party were legitimate and I didn’t discount them, but I think that history has shown that that didn’t happen,” said former Del. Rushern L. Baker, who also helped to plan the 2004 summit. “Instead, what ended up happening is we were able to strengthen the Democratic Party.”

Progressive candidates like Dels. Tom Hucker (D-Dist. 20) of Silver Spring, Heather R. Mizeur (D-Dist. 20) of Takoma Park and Franchot ended up winning their elections in 2006, he said, and Democrats in conservative areas of the state like Howard and Baltimore counties also performed well at the polls.

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., a conservative Democrat who did not attend the 2004 summit, has no bones about this year’s event and hopes it will generate some positive policy proposals for next year’s legislative session.

“I think a lot of positive ideas come out of events like that,” he said.

But progressives also need to understand that the Democratic Party has a big tent, said Miller (D-Dist. 27) of Chesapeake Beach.

“They need to be counterbalanced because the public is somewhere in the middle ... on most things,” he said. “... When they get to the point of saying ‘It’s our way or the highway,’ they are

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no longer very successful or acceptable as people who are willing to subjugate their views to the majority.

“In a democracy, it takes everybody, but you’ve got to be willing to listen to all sides,” he continued. “The progressives have to be willing to listen to the conservatives, the conservatives have to be willing to listen to the progressives and the people in the middle, which is the glue that holds the party together, have to be willing to listen to both sides.”

Dobson agreed and pointed out that at the time of the 2004 summit, the Democratic gubernatorial nominee was still not chosen: then-Baltimore Mayor Martin O’Malley or then-Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan.

“I think there’s a lot of unanimity this year around a certain candidate, so I can’t imagine any discord regardless of whether you’re a ‘Blue Dog’ Democrat or a ‘Real’ Democrat,” he said.

And he said this year’s summit is intended to be more of a policy seminar than a political rally. Dobson said lawmakers won’t be giving speeches and the day will feature breakout groups and policy sessions to help progressive activists craft a united agenda for 2009.

Progressive organizations — environmentalists, civil rights groups, health care advocates, organized labor and educational organizations, among others — sometimes are unaware they have the same goals or butt heads in trying to achieve their individual objectives, said Hucker, who helped plan the 2004 summit when he was executive director of Progressive Maryland

“It was my experience in years of organizing that many activists from different traditions and issue areas that have a lot of common ground often don’t know each other and aren’t in dialogue of how they can work together to achieve common goals,” he said.

While the goal may be policy first and politics second, it could be hard to separate the two, Dobson said.

“It’s primarily about policy, for sure, but when you get 500 like-minded people in the room, of course it’s a political situation as well and you’re building progressive power,” he said. “In the long run, we’re trying to strengthen the progressive movement in our state.”