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In Annapolis, Del. Cryor Is in the Catbird Seat

Leadership Change Lifts Republican's Profile

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The second full week of the Maryland General Assembly session in Annapolis was just getting underway recently when Del. Jean B. Cryor realized she faced a dilemma.

The Montgomery County Republican had been invited to sit with her party's top legislative leaders to plot strategy in the House office building. But at the same time, she was scheduled to discuss the budget with county Democrats across the street.

"These are two meetings I might never have been invited to in the past, and now I've got to juggle both," Cryor marveled as she put on her overcoat. "Things have definitely changed."

Although last fall's election was largely a disaster for Montgomery County Republicans, it was quite the opposite for Cryor, who spent the previous eight years quietly representing the Germantown and Potomac areas in District 15 as a fringe member of the state's Democrat-dominated House of Delegates.

In November, she not only prevailed as the lone Republican among candidates for 32 House and Senate seats to be returned to office by liberal-minded Montgomery voters, but she also saw her stature in Annapolis catapult with the fortunes of her party's successful nominee for governor, Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.

"All of a sudden she's become the big *macha*," said Del. Joan F. Stern (D-Montgomery). "She's the big chief -- the only solid link between our county and the governor's office."

Cryor, 64, has found herself gripping one of the most valuable commodities in Maryland politics, said Gene Counihan, a former Montgomery County delegate who now lobbies in Annapolis for Metro. "She has a level of access to the governor that no other state legislator from our county can claim."

How Cryor will use that power "remains to be seen," Counihan said. "But a lot of people are looking for clues."

The clues to Cryor's political philosophy trace back to what she calls the defining moment in her life, when on May 31, 1978, her husband, Dan Cryor, died unexpectedly at age 45.

Before her husband's death, Cryor had been working with News Election Service, a media consortium responsible for exit polling on election night, and raising their three daughters, who at the time were ages 11, 15 and 16. But when her husband died, she said, it dawned on her that she could no longer travel for work. So she quit.

"All of a sudden, I had no job, no husband and nothing ahead of me," Cryor recalled. "But what I remember is not the panic, but this feeling of absolute strength coming into me."

Like her husband, who had worked as a television news reporter in Washington, then as the executive assistant to a New Jersey congressman, Cryor wanted to stay engaged in both journalism and politics. She took work with a Republican political consultant, and then was hired as a reporter for a start-up chain of local publications, the Gazette newspapers.

Her first bid for the House of Delegates in 1982 was unsuccessful. But after years spent fundraising for the party, she broached the idea of a second attempt 12 years later, and ran successfully on a message of self-sufficiency that she had embodied while working and raising her three children alone.

Since joining the Maryland House, her voting record signals an attempt to dilute her Republican Party affiliation with more liberal social stands, navigating a path similar to that of former U.S. representative Constance A. Morella (R), who represented the heavily Democratic 8th District for the past 16 years until losing her seat in 2002.

Cryor's moderate positions left many Democrats convinced that they should leave her off their list of targeted Republicans last year, according to Del. Sheila Ellis Hixson (D-Montgomery).

"Everyone viewed her as very strong, and not at all vulnerable," Hixson said.

Carol Arscott, a political pollster who followed last year's elections, said that while other Republicans were swamped by the massive campaign machinery employed to unseat Morella, and to promote Democratic gubernatorial candidate Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, Cryor floated above it.

"The issue that set her apart most was experience," Arscott said. "She was the only incumbent running in her district, and that made it easy for her to highlight her participation in things like the Thornton Commission [education funding effort]."

At first, it seemed that being the lone Republican among 24 Montgomery County delegates and eight senators would be extremely isolating for Cryor.

Sen. Robert H. Kittleman (R-Howard) said he still recalls the agony of once being one of the only Republicans in his county's delegation.

"It's up to you to build your whole party, and that's not easy," Kittleman said. "Not many people take you seriously."

But when Cryor arrived in Annapolis this month, she discovered she was being taken very seriously.

The political landscape had changed dramatically for her, as it had for most Republican legislators. Last year, the GOP's ranks in the Maryland legislature were so puny, Ehrlich had declared that the caucus was "teetering on the brink of irrelevancy."

The Democrats in the House of Delegates stopped bothering to poll Republicans for their positions on bills because they did not need any GOP votes to pass measures with veto-proof numbers.

Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele, who at the time was serving as the Republican Party's state chairman, quipped to a reporter that fixating on the party's paltry stature in the legislature "would drive you to drink."

Cryor said she found some freedom in the overwhelming odds against her. "After all, even if I voted against [House leaders] every time, what could they do? I already had the smallest office possible." But it was also a frustrating time. Of the 11 bills she sponsored in 2002, not one of them passed.

This year, Cryor said, being a member of the minority party means she no longer has any excuse if she proves ineffective. It also means she may need to learn how to bend on issues to accommodate the governor's agenda.

A prime example of that is the debate over slot machine gambling. Cryor has always opposed legalizing slot machines to raise revenues. But Ehrlich has committed substantial political energy to seeing slots approved, so she has revisited her stance on the issue. She says now: "Is slots the answer to our budget problems? I don't think so, but I'm willing to look at it."

Unlike in past years, when she could take a stance on legislation with little consequence, this time her opinion matters. As the ranking Republican on the Ways and Means Committee, she has now been placed on a small, select leadership committee that will field all the panel's most controversial bills, including legislation about slot machine gambling.

Likewise, when Ehrlich begins weighing Montgomery County's transportation priorities, his aides said they intend to consult her, and give serious consideration to her opinions.

Although many Montgomery Democrats hope Ehrlich will seek federal funding for a Purple Line Metro route that runs across the county's midsection, Cryor is more interested in the less-controversial proposal for a Corridor Cities Transitway, a light-rail train that would run north from the Shady Grove area along Interstate 270.

Cryor said she doubts the county could get both projects onto a wish list for federal funding, so she will share with the governor her desire to see the transitway bump aside the Purple Line.

Whether that will bother her colleagues across the political aisle, they're not saying anything that might land them on her bad side. One delegation member confided, on the condition he not be named, that "having a good relationship with Jean, at this point, is good politics."

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