

NH Republican makes his mark

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 10, 2011



Ovide Lamontagne campaigns for the Senate at a tea party rally in New Hampshire in April 2010. (Candidate Photos/Chris Fitzgerald)

MANCHESTER, N.H. -- Ovide Lamontagne rejects the title "kingmaker" in New Hampshire's Republican politics. The state's voters, he said, are too independent-minded to take directions from anyone.

But by the time he sat for an interview with *NCR* at his law office in downtown Manchester in late August, he had hosted seven GOP presidential candidates in his home for meet-and-greet parties, each attended by as many as 300 Republican activists.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry had not been there yet, but Lamontagne and his wife had breakfast with Perry the day after the governor announced his candidacy at the beginning of August. "Potential kingmaker" and "power broker" are descriptions *The New York Times* used in a long April profile about Lamontagne and his candidate house parties.

If Lamontagne is increasingly being recognized as a point of power and influence within New Hampshire Republican politics, less well-known is the fact that he also has long been active in the Catholic church and goes to Mass most mornings at St. Joseph Cathedral, across the park from his law office. On Sundays he attends St. Anthony of Padua Church, where he was baptized and went to parochial school.

He is an outside general counsel to the Manchester diocese and has served as chairman of the diocesan school board, a member of the corporate campaign for New Hampshire Catholic Charities as well as the Catholic Lawyers Guild of New Hampshire.

Lamontagne vaulted onto the radar screen of GOP presidential aspirants because of his bid for the U.S. Senate last year. In the primary, Lamontagne faced a much better-funded opponent in Kelly Ayotte, who also had the additional benefit of having recently won statewide election as attorney general. But Lamontagne became a favorite of the tea party and he lost the primary by only 1 percentage point. His decision to immediately back Ayotte's candidacy showed him to be a team player, and his strong performance at the polls convinced the GOP contenders that he could be a gatekeeper to tea party enthusiasts. In September, he said he would run for governor of New Hampshire.

Lamontagne deflects talk about being a kingmaker by saying his ambition is "to be someone who is trying to help like-minded conservatives meet the candidates so we can discern who we think is the best candidate, and by that I mean, the most conservative candidate who can win."

The popular rap on several of the GOP candidates who have risen to the top in recent weeks is that they are too conservative to win in the general election, but Lamontagne hasn't yet met a 2012 Republican hopeful he doesn't like.

Though he's waiting this year before making an endorsement, he was a supporter four years ago of Mitt Romney, the former governor of neighboring Massachusetts.

Michele Bachmann is definitely on his radar screen. "I have spent more than an hour with her one-on-one," Lamontagne said. "She is a very bright woman, she is articulate, passionate. Also, unlike the other candidates, she is an authentic grass-roots activist."

I asked why some people dismiss her chances. "The reason she is discounted is because of, maybe, the hangover from Sarah Palin and some of her missteps that she has had," he said. "I don't know how she will appeal across the board but there is a lot of interest in her campaign here in New Hampshire."

Lamontagne finds Perry both impressive and the kind of candidate around whom most Republicans could rally. "I find him to be a very engaging, passionate and principled conservative," Lamontagne said. "I don't know him that well. I am interested in seeing how he presents himself through the lens of the media."

What about Romney's changing positions on certain issues, especially on abortion? Romney was pro-choice until switching his stand while governor of Massachusetts, saying that he reached his new stance while considering what to do about stem cell research. "I think there has been an authentic conversion by him on that issue and it happened prior to the 2008 election cycle and he has held that position pretty strongly," Lamontagne said. "There is a key aide to him, Peter Flaherty, a strong Catholic who helped articulate Gov. Romney's position on stem cell research in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts."

Asked if the flip-flop would hurt him at the polls, Lamontagne said, "There is nothing like a convert and I take him at his word that he is authentically converted to the pro-life position." Lamontagne also admires Romney's traditional values of Mormon faith and his strong family. He may not be ready to endorse Romney again, but he hasn't counted him out either. Lamontagne wants, as he said, "the most conservative candidate who can win."

Political vocation

Lamontagne has come to see his political engagement as a part of his Christian vocation. "Our Christian tradition calls us to serve others," he told me. "There is no greater act of love for a neighbor than service to them, and there are a number of ways to do that, obviously, but politics is one of them." He recalled the way John Kennedy's inaugural speech -- "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" -- inspired generations of Americans, and especially Catholics, to service.

At The Catholic University of America in Washington in the late 1970s, Lamontagne wondered about pursuing a vocation to the priesthood but he had already been bitten by the political bug. It wasn't politics he studied at Catholic University, but rather chemistry and then psychology. But he ran for student council president and won. In an odd twist, he was nominated by his classmate and friend Terry McAuliffe, who would go on to become chairman of the Democratic National Committee. Another college friend, Tom Donilon, introduced Lamontagne to his wife and was best man at their wedding. Donilon is now national security advisor to President Barack Obama.

Lamontagne said that in New Hampshire, the Catholic church has largely stayed away from partisan politics. He recalled that when he ran for the Senate last year, a group of friends wanted to hold a meet-and-greet at the parish hall, but the pastor said that would be inappropriate. Lamontagne regretted a recent kerfuffle when Manchester Bishop John McCormack called for the Legislature to avoid budget cuts in programs that assist the poor and the vulnerable, and a Republican state legislator responded by calling McCormack "a pedophile pimp." Before coming to Manchester, McCormack was a chief aide to Cardinal Bernard Law in Boston.

Like many conservative Catholics, the issue of abortion is at the forefront of Lamontagne's political views. He considers Obama a pro-choice ideologue. "I think President Obama is pro-abortion and he will do whatever he can to advance that issue but he has been subsumed by other issues."

Neither is he entirely happy with the results Republican presidents have achieved on the issue. "We haven't accomplished a lot as a party but that's because the Supreme Court has made it a constitutional issue. We have to either amend the Constitution or appoint the right mix of jurists so that we make progress on the issue of preserving and promoting life." He said he regrets that New Hampshire is one of the most pro-choice states in the country, but takes some comfort from the recent passage of a parental notification law, passed over the veto of the state's Democratic governor.

Lamontagne's other political views, however, do not track very well with the positions articulated by either recent popes or by the U.S. bishops. During the hourlong interview, he did not once reference any official church teachings for the positions he articulated.

Despite the long history of ecclesiastical support for the rights of workers, Lamontagne is deeply suspicious of unions. He penned a recent op-ed for the *Union Leader*, Manchester's conservative newspaper, in which Lamontagne argued for a "right-to-work" law that makes it harder for unions to organize and he criticized the Obama administration's National Labor Relations Board for meddling in what he believes should be a state issue.

Asked to respond to Pope Benedict XVI's words in *Caritas in Veritate*, "The repeated calls issued within the church's social doctrine, beginning with *Rerum Novarum*, for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights must therefore be honored today even more than in the past," he was unmoved. "With respect to right to work it becomes, for me, an individual freedom of choice," Lamontagne said. "If I am working somewhere in a workplace that is unionized and I am compelled to pay dues and participate in a union that is promoting abortion rights and supporting candidates who are opposed to the great core issues that I believe in as a matter of conscience and I'm not allowed to opt out, that's a problem. "Right to work is no longer about busting unions." Union leaders and members would certainly argue with his conclusion.

Libertarian currents

Lamontagne's invocation of "individual freedom of choice" echoes the current libertarian currents within the tea party. But the phrase also echoes the arguments of pro-choice advocates. Indeed, it is a curiosity in today's political landscape that the extremists on both the left and the right are those who exhibit the most profound libertarian tendencies within each party. Libertarian Republicans invoke Ayn Rand and libertarian Democrats invoke Betty Friedan.

Lamontagne explained what might be seen as a contradiction between church teaching and extreme individualism by pointing to the example of the early church. "There was a collectivist spirit in the early church, and that's fine, but that was by election, that's by choice, not by saying that government must require collectivism." He argued that when the church says that the moral order demands government involvement in issues like collective bargaining and the attainment of social justice, "it says more than it needs to."

A July letter to members of Congress written by Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., and Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., on behalf of the U.S. bishops' conference highlights the difficulty in Lamontagne's view that the church should not be asking government to get involved in attaining social justice. Blair and Hubbard wrote: "A just framework for future budget cuts cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor persons. It requires shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenue." Are the bishops correct?

"They are injecting themselves into a policy position they shouldn't be, frankly," Lamontagne answered. "If it were the case that we had a bare-bones budget at the state and federal level that provided for the social safety net, that was as creative as possible in terms of how we deliver services, and we said we're still coming up short, then we might look at revenue enhancements, so-called, or fees or things like that. [New Hampshire is one of the few states in the country with no personal income tax levied by the state government.] But that is not what has happened here in New Hampshire or nationally. We have allowed spending to get out of control."

Lamontagne is more nuanced when it comes to the issue of immigration. "I think that immigration is not only an important part of our history but where we will draw our strength in the future — but what we've lost sight of is what immigration is supposed to be about," said Lamontagne, who is himself a fourth-generation New Hampshireer who grew up speaking French Canadian at home. "And it is about making sure that people who are here want to be here to be Americans, to want to be people who believe that we are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights, who believe in the Judeo-Christian approach to government. That is not meant to be discriminatory against certain people. It is to be pro-American. It is unfair, frankly, for us to kid ourselves that we allow people to come into this country and we don't require them to learn English, we don't require them to understand the Constitution and become Americanized. Then we force them to become part of a subculture in this country and it is not fair to them or to us." He does not advocate any comprehensive immigration policy that would include amnesty for undocumented workers.

If Lamontagne is a tea party favorite, he is distinctly unlike the iconic tea party activists who populate public rallies. He delves well beyond sound bites, into the intricacies of public policy. He never rants, and his demeanor could not be more different from that of some tea party activists who seem to relish in extreme rhetoric. He may deny that he is a "kingmaker" but his influence is undoubted. There is a reason all those would-be presidents have made their way to his house. For Catholics, he may also be setting some terms of the longer-range debate over the place and purpose of church teaching in the public square.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about religion and politics on his Distinctly Catholic blog on the *NCR* website, at NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic.]

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