

Nevada's "E.T." Assemblyman [news article]

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Date: Wed, 30 Apr 1997 09:09:00 -0800

Subject: Nevada's "E.T." Assemblyman [news article]

[From http://www.lvrj.com/lvrj_home/1997/Apr-28-Mon-1997/news/5219220.html]

QUIRKY LAWMAKER BREAKS FROM PACK, PAYS PRICE

Pushing to create embassies for space aliens is one way Bob Price shows his independence.

Las Vegas Review-Journal, Monday, April 28, 1997

By Sean Whaley
Donrey Capital Bureau

CARSON CITY -- Assemblyman Bob Price doesn't just follow a different path in the Legislature, he breaks his own trail.

Colleagues refer to the North Las Vegas Democrat as eccentric, quirky, or any other number of adjectives that place him out of the staid and static norm of the legislative hallways.

Consider some of the recent actions of the 60-year-old lawmaker:

--He has drafted but not yet introduced an Assembly resolution recognizing Las Vegas and Carson City as embassies for the "saucerians," a name for visitors from outer space expected to land on earth in 1999.

--One of his acquaintances and supporters in the Legislature is Mr. Ambassador Merlin, a somewhat odd and quirky fellow himself who claims to be from another planet, one that orbits the star Alpha Draconis in the Milky Way.

--At the dedication last spring of the Extraterrestrial Highway at Rachel, Price appeared costumed as Darth Vader.

--Earlier this legislative session, Price named retired prostitute and failed congressional candidate Jessi Winchester of Virginia City as a volunteer research assistant.

--He had planned his second "fact-finding" tour of the Mustang Ranch brothel east of Reno for April 22, with other lawmakers, staff and press invited along for the ride. But the event was canceled by the Nevada Brothel Owners Association after a negative column in a local newspaper.

None of these actions raise much of an eyebrow in the Legislature, however, where the phrase "Bob is just being Bob" is the normal reaction to his actions and exploits.

"Bob is a fun-loving guy but he has a love and respect for this institution," said Assembly Majority Leader Richard Perkins, D-Henderson. "Because of that he has earned my respect."

George Flint, a lobbyist representing the Nevada Brothel Owners Association, said Price seems to have a Teflon coating protecting him from criticism for his eccentricities.

"Bob appears harmless in activities that might get others into trouble," he said.

A good example might be the first brothel tour in 1995, when three other lawmakers braved the potential critical backlash and accompanied him on the tour, paid for by Flint's bosses. Two of the three Assembly members were not re-elected and the third chose not to run.

But Price has paid a price for his actions, especially in his fight with the gaming industry in 1989.

He angered the gamers by suggesting campaign contributions from the industry be prohibited. They helped fund his opponent's campaign in 1990, although Price won re-election.

Price, who has served as chairman of the influential Taxation Committee in six legislative sessions, was cut out of the loop this year in the important debate over infrastructure.

Both lobbyists and legislative leaders said one reason for the creation of the new Assembly Infrastructure Committee was to get the important issues resulting from the growth of Southern Nevada out of his control.

One lobbyist, who asked not to be named, said working in Price's committee meant working around him and not with him.

And while there were other reasons for creating the Infrastructure Committee, including giving newcomers, such as Chairman David Goldwater, D-Las Vegas, a chance to shine, Price's behavior was also a factor.

While he has his critics, the second-longest serving member of the Assembly after Speaker Joe Dini, who was first elected in 1967, also has his supporters.

A labor supporter and electrician, Price has served his mostly blue-collar district well since 1975.

Price is also credited for his efforts to open up the legislative process to public scrutiny, from reforming the lobbyist financial reporting system to getting lawmakers to identify themselves on their bill draft requests.

Ambassador Merlin said Price's ideas are progressive and his perspective is valuable to the Legislature. Of course, Merlin also said he believes Price gets his ideas from aliens.

Price, who said he plans to continue to run for re-election for the foreseeable future, said it may have been his well-traveled upbringing that has set him apart from his colleagues.

"I attended 13 different schools growing up," he said. "Possibly that made me more aware of different ideas than if I had grown up in one home."

Political risk isn't something that Price said he considers too heavily when making decisions.

"I try to do what I think is right and let the chips fall," he said. "I try to keep an open mind and I know there are two sides to every issue."

Price, who seems to enjoy his oddball reputation and the publicity that sometimes accompanies it, said he is satisfied if he is known as someone who treats others fairly.

But don't expect him to change his ways.

Every day in the Assembly can be a new adventure with Price around.

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