

# What would Melissa Hortman have said about this recent disdain for career politicians?

The Minnesota Republican Party just endorsed candidates for state offices who in most cases haven't previously held elected office.



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Just when Minnesota could use a rebuttal to the flawed notion that career politicians should be spurned at the polls, there she is.

Melissa Hortman.

Oh, how I wish the Minnesota House speaker emeritus was still with us in the flesh, still graciously available to a pesky journalist seeking a few morsels of quotable insight.

But as the first anniversary of the assassination of Hortman, her husband, Mark, and her dog, Gilbert, approaches this Sunday, Hortman's name and image have been back in focus. She's been getting daily mentions on the news and in social media.

Even her voice – calm and encouraging – was heard at Monday's fundraising luncheon for Women Winning, the pro-choice feminist group whose annual parade of female House members Hortman led from 2017 through 2025.

To be sure, Minnesota has been well served through the years by dozens of other men and women who deserved to wear the label "career

politician," and could do so proudly, too.

But as a case-in-point retort to the smear against long government service that's been coming this year from some notable Minnesota quarters, Hortman serves well.

As she always did.

Hortman was 28 years old and a newly minted attorney in 1998 when she first ran for the state Legislature from north-suburban District 34B. She lost. She lost again in 2002 – but she made such a strong impression on this newspaper's endorsement screening team that we touted her that year as a future legislative standout. Already then, Hortman spoke like someone who had decided that lawmaking would be her life's work.

After winning by only 390 votes in 2004, she could have decided to focus on electioneering. Instead, she made herself an expert on a number



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Rep. Melissa Hortman at a news conference on Jan. 6, 2025.

of the complexities of modern life that Minnesotans expect state government to tackle – environmental protection, education finance, infrastructure development.

She made time to build positive relationships with other lawmakers of both parties, plus lobbyists, staff and the rest of the Capitol crowd. Seldom did she draw attention to herself. Often, she shared the limelight with others.

Those aren't just personal proclivities. They are the acquired patterns of a lawmaker who seeks to be in it for the long haul and to master the norms, rhythms and nuances of the institution in

which she serves. Those conscious choices helped make Hortman a highly effective House speaker and leader of her caucus.

That kind of career commitment ought to be valued and rewarded, especially within political parties that ask voters to trust them to govern well.

But resumes rich with service in elected offices are not what the Republican Party has offered Minnesota voters for statewide offices this year. Seldom has an endorsed slate emerged from a Minnesota major party convention that features less governing experience.

GOP endorsees Kendall

Qualls for governor and Adam Schwarze for U.S. Senate have never held elected office. Neither has lieutenant governor endorsee Brian Nicholson or attorney general endorsee Ron Schutzh.

The only endorsed candidates who have are secretary of state endorsee Tad Jude, who was a legislator, then a Hennepin County commissioner, from 1973 through 1993. And state auditor candidate Nate George, who is the mayor of Braham, Minn., with a population of 1,800.

Several of these candidates have military and business backgrounds and have been leaders in those realms. But if I could interview Hortman, I bet she'd point out important ways in which the leadership requirements in those sectors differ from those in a public-facing, power-sharing, ever-shifting democracy.

I bet she'd be astounded that GOP convention delegates on May 30 opted for Qualls over House Speaker Lisa Demuth – a veteran of eight years in the Legislature and 11 years on the Rocori school board.

Demuth was right to emphasize her more fitting gubernatorial qualifications when she opted to continue

her candidacy in the Aug. 11 Republican primary. Voters in that election will have a chance to exhibit a higher regard for governing experience than convention delegates did.

But animus toward career politicians is a bigger issue than one contest in one party this year. If I could talk to Hortman, we'd discuss how disparagement of government service is making candidate recruitment more difficult, citizen engagement more tenuous and governance more difficult.

We'd lament that in 21 legislative districts this year, the DFL candidate will face no Republican opponent. (DFL candidates have filed in all 201 districts.) I bet Hortman would say that so many sure wins might be good for her party, but they are bad for representative democracy.

I hope she'd add – in spite of the tragic way her service ended – that elected office is still a noble calling, worthy of a lifetime's devotion.

And, I'd add, of Minnesotans' respect.

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