

Hafer's Irish problem

What did Auditor General Barbara Hafer mean when she called Bob Casey, the man she wants to replace as governor, "a redneck Irishman"? Supporters and critics of Ms. Hafer have been offering various interpretations of this inane remark, none of them particularly convincing.

The most plausible characterization of the remark, and even this isn't very flattering to Ms. Hafer, is that it had no meaning; it was just the sort of gaffe that sometimes spills out when a politician's mouth is working faster than her brain.

At least that seems true of the "Irish" part of her description of the governor.

Even if Ms. Hafer didn't have relatives and a campaign manager who hail (at some remove) from the Emerald Isle, it would be hard to take seriously the suggestion that she harbors anti-Irish bigotry. House Speaker Robert O'Donnell, a Democrat, professed to find Ms. Hafer's comment "outrageous," but some will interpret his indignation in partisan rather than ethnic terms.

The sense that partisanship is thicker than blood is strengthened by the reaction of Irishmen of the Republican persuasion, who found nothing offensive in Ms. Hafer's comment. House Minority Leader Matthew Ryan even embroidered on the subject, as it were, by calling Mr. Casey "lace-curtain Irish. I think of

lace-curtain Irish as people who live in fine houses, they've been successful in life, and that's how I think of Casey, and it's not an ethnic slur at all."

Maybe not, but "redneck Irishman" is a far cry from "lace-curtain Irishman." As students of ethnic invective know, the more appropriate equivalent for Ms. Hafer's term would be "shanty Irishman."

Actually, it's the "redneck" part of Ms. Hafer's comment that may really cause her trouble, because it does lend itself to a (minimally) coherent interpretation. The context of Ms. Hafer's remark was abortion. "I'm a pro-choice Republican from the west," she told a GOP gathering on Tuesday, "and Bob Casey is a redneck Irishman from Scranton."

By contrasting "redneck" with "pro-choice," Ms. Hafer seemed to be including the governor in the ranks of the most intemperate opponents of abortion. Such people exist in the "pro-life" movement, but Gov. Casey is not one of them.

Despite his firm opposition to abortion, Mr. Casey has never played the demagogue on the issue. Indeed, activists on both sides of the abortion debate could take lessons in dignity and decorum from the governor. And so, as this tempest in a pot o' gold shows, could his opponent.

Progress on the 'tech' site

There is both good news and bad news in the announcement of an early start on constructing the first building on the Pittsburgh Technology Center in Hazelwood.

The good news is that the state Department of Environmental Resources has determined that a half-acre site eyed by the University of Pittsburgh for its \$14 million Center for Biotechnology and Bioengineering does not contain dangerous levels of contaminants.

The bad news is that the agency still wants to conduct more tests in other sections of the 48-acre park, the former Jones & Laughlin mill site on the Monongahela River, to look for possible deposits of cyanide, a deadly poison.

The possible presence of toxic wastes is a major reason why the development of the Technology Center has not taken off as quickly as many hoped. The experience at that location has shown both the cost and time that will be required to sanitize old mill sites for any use other than heavy industry. Even if the DER were to allow it, these days no one is going to move in with light-industry or office installations without solid reassurances about old wastes.

Still, with a groundbreaking in May or June for Pitt's biotech center, there at least will be something significant to show on that bleak, razed plain along Second Avenue.

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