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Candidates disagree on attorney general's role

Chambers: Office favors powerful | Douglas: Office favors the people

By Pat Higgins

State Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha said that if elected, he would change the direction of the attorney general's office.

Chambers said there is now a double standard in the office favoring the powerful. Attorney General Paul Douglas is not personally corrupt, Chambers said, but "he runs a sloppy ship."

"When the fountainhead of justice is tainted, everything that flows from it shares in the taint," Chambers said. He cited lenient sentences in the bid-



Staff Photo by Dave Bentz

Sen. Ernie Chambers



Staff Photo by Dave Bentz

Attorney General Paul Douglas

By Pat Higgins

As state attorney general, Paul Douglas runs an office that is staffed by 32 other lawyers. His salary is \$39,500, which is far below what he could make in private practice with a staff that large.

"To say that it's rewarding is something that everyone giggles at, but this is the work that I enjoy. Money is not a primary goal," Douglas said.

First elected in 1974 in a tough race against former Gov. Frank Morrison, Douglas has changed the approach of the attorney general's office during the last eight years.

The number of advocacy offices have increased dramatically during that span, Douglas said. A consumer protection division, an equal opportunity section and anti-trust and water law division also have been added.

"When I took office, it was primarily a corporate office for the state. I know this is a horrible analogy, but we're really more people-oriented now," he said.

Because of the increased scope of his office, Douglas said that more staff would be helpful, but it's doubtful that the Legislature would appropriate more money because of the trying economic times. After the federal budget cuts of 1981, grants and revenue sharing have been decreased.

"Well, we finally got the federal government off of our backs, but now we need the people and legislature of the state of Nebraska to make up the difference,"

he said. "The problem is none of the legislators want to go home and be labeled a big spender."

"Don't get me wrong though, I am a big states-rights man, and I wouldn't want to go back to the way it was a couple years ago."

A native of Sioux Falls, S.D., Douglas received his law degree from UNL in 1953, and he was elected Lancaster County attorney in 1960. He remained at that post until he became attorney general in 1974.

"I come out of a prosecutor's background. I enjoy going into court with the adversary system - it's still fun," he said.

The attorney general's office is described by Douglas as "the lawyer for Nebraska."

His opponent for the attorney general's position is Sen. Ernie Chambers.

Chambers, a graduate of Creighton University Law School, has not taken the bar exam and Douglas said that he is confident about his own re-election chances.

"Sen. Chambers is well known to many voters. I'm standing on my record, and I hope that the people of the state know what I have done," he said. "Contrary to what Sen. Chambers has said, it takes a lawyer to be attorney general. Who would you hire for the lawyer for the state of Nebraska, someone who is neither qualified or eligible?"

Chambers has made several comments about Douglas's refusal to debate him.

"I don't see any reason to debate. Sen. Chambers would not be interested in talking about negotiating settlements. He'd be talking about philosophy, which is in the scope of the Legislature," he said. "Some people would probably enjoy watching Sen. Chambers tell you how great he is."

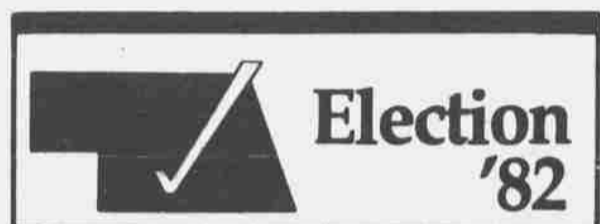
Chambers maintains that he has beaten Douglas on several issues.

"That's poppycock. Sen. Chambers said that he beat me on the legislative chaplain issue. Actually, the 8th U.S. Circuit of Appeals agreed with me. On the banking bill issue, Sen. Chambers, who had been a banking supporter, sat on his hands and let the vote in the Legislature tie, 24-24. That night my office worked until 2 a.m. to get the proper legal decision," he said.

Douglas said it is important that the attorney general's office remain autonomous. He said he enjoyed a good working relationship with Sen. James Exon when Exon was governor.

"Even though we were of different political faiths, I think that any member of Exon's staff would agree that we worked together smoothly," he said.

When Gov. Charles Thone took office, Douglas said that his role was to help explain the inner working of the state government to Thone.



rigging scandal as an example of a double standard of justice.

First elected to the Nebraska Legislature in 1970, Chambers has a reputation for his eloquence and defense of those without power. He is running against Douglas as an independent candidate.

A graduate of Creighton University Law School, Chambers has refused to take the bar exam, which has led some to comment that he would be unqualified for the attorney general position.

"The very fact that I'm on the ballot demonstrates that I am not disqualified," Chambers said. "For instance, if the (state) treasurer was not bondable, his or her name would not be allowed on the ballot. There is no constitutional requirement that the attorney general has to take the bar exam and join their secret club. Whatever the duties of the office would require, I would be able to do."

Consumer protection

Chambers said the attorney general's office should emphasize consumer protection more. He cited the office's inability to deal with scandal in the Omaha housing rehabilitation program, in which there had been a series of phony billings and shoddy work by contractors.

"I contacted Paul Douglas when I became aware of this housing scandal. He said there were similar problems in Lincoln, but that he was stymied to do anything about them. I then contacted the FBI and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which initiated investigations that led to corrections in the housing policy," he said.

People do not look to the attorney general's office for consumer assistance, he said. Citizens with nowhere to turn come to him.

"Instead of stating intentions, a public person should point to a record of achievement. The attorney general's office has two dozen lawyers, yet people still seem to have more confidence in my responding to

their problems. People should give me the tools to solve their problem - the job of attorney general," Chambers said.

Closed shop

The legal profession is a closed shop that needs to be reformed, he said, adding that special interest groups wield too much power.

"If I was elected, I would symbolize what a person trained in law should be like. My example would put pressure on the entire legal community to improve their performance," Chambers said. "Contrary to what the incumbent says, being a member of the bar association may be a disqualifying factor because of all the special interest freight that entails."

Chambers continued to press for a debate with Douglas, who he characterized as personable and congenial.

"My intent in a debate is not to have a knock-down, drag-out affair whose purpose would be to embarrass the incumbent," Chambers said. "Rather, I wanted the two of us to present our views and philosophy."

A debate would allow the public to make an informed judgment about which person is more suited to be attorney general, Chambers said.

"Keep in mind that I am a lone, overworked, underpaid state senator," Chambers said. "If I was elected, with two dozen bright assistants and my vision, Nebraska would be the showcase for the universe."

Family Shelter gives emergency aid to destitutes

By Vicki Ruhga

Henry and Elizabeth Davis and their three children left New York because Henry had a job offer in Wyoming. However, when they arrived in Wyoming, the job did not materialize. The family headed back to Troy, N.Y., where they had relatives, but they ran out of gas, food and money in Lincoln.

Family Shelter, a program sponsored by the People's City Mission, 124 S. 9th St., helped the Davis family. Gerry Ann Ortega, public relations director of the Mission, said the Davis family was given a gas voucher for their car, lodging, meals and information about where to find help on the way to New York.

"The shelter is used as a last resort for people who have no place else to go," Ortega said. "They are usually transients or someone who has been evicted because of

a personal crisis."

Families who have been evicted because they couldn't pay the rent often stay at the shelter until they can get welfare aid, she said. Victims of abuse are also given lodging there.

Ortega said the need for family shelters has increased because of the country's economic condition.

"A lot of people are traveling across the country looking for work, which often doesn't materialize," she said. "We also get people from Lincoln who walk in and need food, clothing or help to pay utility bills."

Additional family shelter services include a clothing service and food bank. The shelter also acts as a referral agency, setting up contacts and pointing to other agencies when they can't solve a problem.

Ortega said a job service is used to get men staying in the shelter back to work. However, she said, there

are not many jobs in these hard economic times.

Funding for the Family Shelter comes from United Way, which provides 30 to 35 percent of the budget. Churches and individual contributions also help. They also receive some revenue funds, Ortega said.

The average family usually stays for three to five days in the shelter, Ortega said. The cost to keep a family at the shelter is \$30 per night, and \$1 per meal, she said. The shelter is sometimes reimbursed by the welfare department, she added.

Of the 432 people visiting the shelter through August 1982, 199 have been children. This compares with 1,160 people served during the entire year of 1981.

The shelter has served 1,146 meals through August of this year. In addition, they have also given out household items, clothing and furniture to needy families, she said.