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[00:00:01] **Speaker 1** Is that one good? Yeah try giving your... No I'm sorry is the other camera rolling? Oh yeah. Okay do you need a clap or are you good? Well yeah we probably shouldn't clap. Yeah, okay. Remember, you too are in. Good. Well, Representative, thanks for meeting with us. What's it like to be back in the state capitol?

[00:00:30] **Speaker 2** Well, it's exciting on one hand. You know, I still tell people when they ask me that question, I still get those good fuzzy feelings driving down East Washington Street. You come into the Capitol, and the Capitol comes into view as you're driving. And there's still an electric feeling. And then I know, at that point, I kind of went, you know, did the right thing by coming back, because it's still exciting to walk into this building. It's a beautiful building. And, uh... You know that you're representing almost 60,000 people. And so from that standpoint, it's exciting. The state of politics has made it a lot different than what it was when I left. And the divide has gotten bigger and that's been a challenge.

[00:01:20] **Speaker 1** Your political history, especially at the Capitol, is it three or four generations of politics or how much has that shift taken place? Because we're talking long periods of time but also different eras of politics in this building.

[00:01:34] **Speaker 2** Yeah, when you think about it, I started, I was elected in 1990, took office January of 1991 and here we are today. This clearly, it wasn't in the road, you know, the road map. It wasn't the plan. But we're back here and excited to be here and looking forward to, you know, doing the best job I can for the next two years for the citizens of the 53rd. But things were sure a lot different, you back in the days in the 90s. The climate was different. The people were different. There was much more congeniality. There was more, I can go on and on, but working together. It wasn't as, I think, tense between the two parties. So that's the biggest thing. And I knew that was a possibility. I left here in 2014. So, yeah. You know, a good run of 24 years here, and I'm fortunate for that. But when I left, part of the reason I left was because I could see the growing divide. I could The right was going more to the right, the left was going more to left. And some Republicans were being taken out in primaries, some Democrats were being taking out in primaries because they weren't far enough left or right. And I'm a conservative. I'm fiscal conservative. I was a chair of the Joint Finance Committee. I think back then we did a pretty darn good job with what we had. Those were lean years. And we did budgets. I served in the minority. I served the majority, back into the minority, and then back into majority. So I've seen a lot over my years. But I could see the divide just becoming more and more and more and I'm a local government guy. I started in city council. I owned businesses back in Nina. I'm in Nina Menasha guy. And I said, you know what, I want to go back. I want get out of this political environment. And so I decided to run for mayor, was successful doing that, spent eight years, best eight years of my life because you know what, there was no Republican, there There was no Democrat. It was just doing what you felt was the best thing for the citizens of the city of Neena. So, you know, didn't even join the party those years because I thought it was important that the mayor be non-political, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. So then, retired, never expected to come back, quite frankly, but here we are today, and it has gotten worse than when I left.

[00:04:08] **Speaker 1** You mentioned you were the co-chair of Joint Finance. Compare and contrast how the budget was done back in the 2000s, Governor Doyle, Democrat, versus today, Governor Evers, a Democrat with Republican legislative majorities.

[00:04:23] **Speaker 2** Yeah, that's a great question, especially in this environment that we're in. And we were able to do things together. Even back then, when Jim Doyle was governor, the Republicans had the legislature, and I was the chair of joint finance. There was a lot more communication between the governor's office and between the finance committee and the legislative leaders. You know, I respect Governor Evers. And I met with them after I came back here, because Governor Revers knows that I was one of the more moderate members of the Republican caucus. And you gotta be, when the district that I represent is 45% Republican, 55% Democrat. And so I represent the district. And that communication just doesn't seem to be there. And I told the governor, I said, Governor, you gotta reach out, you gotta extend that out of range. You're the governor. You've got to put the big boy pants on and say, you know what? We're going to try and do this together. And I didn't see any of that. I mean, the governor does it in secret, does it all by himself. When Jim Doyle was here, there was a little bit more reaching out during the process, which I think took care of some of the sharp edges when he put it out there. And they're all political documents, each and every one of them, no matter who's governor, Republican or Democrat. But there just seemed to be a lot more reaching out back then, a lot more trying to maybe take some of the sharpness out of it. And then maybe even making a few changes during the process. And so I'm glad to see that this past week, as I understand, and I've been asking our leadership, reach out. Just keep asking for meetings, because we're not going to get this done. You know, the old fashioned way like we did it previously, but you know someone's gotta give and it's gotta happen somehow. And so they reached out, I guess they had a few meetings this week that were productive on both sides, but it's sure a lot different now because you know we always worked off the governor's budget, we worked base budget, sometimes we go back to base, but now as you know. We just kind of throw the whole thing out, and we start over. And I don't think that that's particularly healthy.

[00:06:54] **Speaker 1** How much has changed in the building within the parties themselves? And not left or right, but the power of leadership. Because we've seen changes over the last decade that allow more of the funding to come through the party and flow down to the members. And I'm sure when you ran for office for the first time, you did a lot of that on your own. You weren't asking for party leaders to support you on your way up.

[00:07:15] **Speaker 2** That's the biggest difference. My entire years in the legislature, we were responsible for our own fundraising. It was all local. It was our friends, family, it was all constituents. It was pretty much local. And then you'd have the groups, organizations who, you know, like-minded individuals who would send you some conduit dollars, send you pack dollars. It has just been totally thrown out the window. The biggest thing that I've seen, you know, the most we spent was $39,000, I think, was the highest that I ever spent in my campaign. And you know now it's millions of dollars. The Democrats and their friends spent $3.8 million against me. Our side I think spent $1.3 million. Job pays $57,000 a year. It is crazy. And so, what's happened is, more of the power... Goes to leadership on both sides. This is both sides of the aisle. Because they're the ones who have to raise you the money. The party has to raise the money, the caucus has to rise you the money because I'm not going to raise those kind of funds. And then there's that reliance on leadership and I think then what happens is, you know, when it comes time for legislation, you know the lobbyists and the governmental relations people all go to the leadership. And convince them of voting aye or nay against a bill. And there's no discussion about it, but I think there's a little bit of a nod that, hey, this group helped you or this group didn't help you because of the immense dollars that are spent. And in my particular race, every state in the union financed my opponent. And what the heck do they care about this seat? Is 53rd Assembly District seat Nina Menasha. So money, money in itself is one of the biggest factors that I've seen that has changed this place. And I don't know if it's Citizens United, I don't know what the reasoning is, but the cost of these elections. And you gotta have it, because if you don't, what's gonna happen is the other side is just gonna pour dollars in, or their friends are gonna pour in dollars in and you're not gonna stand a chance. So you gotta compete in the money wars and that's part of the job that I hate here.

[00:09:40] **Speaker 1** So, towards the end of your first time here in office, Act 10 was the largest piece of legislation. You were one of only a handful of Republicans to vote against it. Give us a sense of your appraisal of that bill more than 10 years on.

[00:09:54] **Speaker 2** Yeah, you know, I was here, these were stressful times, you know. I mean, this was a big deal back then, if you recall. There was hundreds of thousands of people here, breaking windows, you know, coming into our offices. It was tense times. We were ushered out by police and things like that. And it was a highly volatile issue. You know, and I was one of those more moderate Republicans coming from the 19th Senate District with a senator, Senator Ellis. And this was kind of popped out of nowhere because he didn't give you Scott didn't even give us much warning on this And so while the merits of the bill I understood and I fully supported the concept of this I didn't like how it was rolled out I didn't particularly like the idea of exempting police and fire because as a local government guy, I Was worried that having two classifications of local employees police and fire. My dad was a cop, so I loved cops, I loved firefighters. But having two, you know, treating them differently than the garbage men and the guys who do the street sanitation, I thought would cause problems in the end. So I just didn't like the concept of that. And there were some other things, and then being a 50-50 district seat. And so at the time, I struggled for a long time, and at the end of the day I voted no. I told the governor, I said... You know, my district just doesn't want me to support this. I see a lot of merit in it, Governor. I think if we take our time a little bit and we work out the kinks, we might get this right. But clearly, with the volatile environment, it was important to get this thing done. So at the time, I didn't vote for it. I had mixed emotions. But at the end of the day, the Governor still supported me in the next election. But what was truly disheartening was that the groups like the unions, they didn't support me, you know, and Act 10 was the biggest bill that the unions had ever come up in the history of Wisconsin, and I was only one of four Republicans. But I will also say this, when I became mayor, then it became evidently clear to me how important this bill was to local government, because as a chief executive officer of the city of Neena, I couldn't have made it without Act 10, because the costs were exponentially. Wages and cost of materials, and now it's even, I think, got worse. So as mayor, it showed me that without Act 10, the communities that provide the services at the ground level would have had a heck of a time without the passage of Act 10. So I'm glad we did it, and we'll see what happens where we go from here.

[00:12:41] **Speaker 1** What are the questions you get from the members who weren't here when that passed, or maybe not even politically aware when that past? Do they ask you about those days, or do they come to you for your wisdom passing down on high?

[00:12:55] **Speaker 2** Yeah, it's been interesting. I don't want to be the guy who is the elder statesman, but I guess I've been here a long time, more than anybody. And the caucuses has relied on that institutional memory. I've told them many times that I've seen about everything here. And it could be a really great place, and we could really get great things done. But we got to work together. We got to find a way to figure out this problem we have that money is important. But it's a different place. We used to have dinner together at night, Republicans and Democrats. We used have a softball game, Christmas party. You got to know each other. You got find out about their families, Republicans, Democrats. We'd go to the Avenue Bar and Grill. We'd push tables together. Seven Republicans one night, 10 Democrats. The next night it'd be six Democrats and four Repubs. But you get to know each other a little bit. And we worked to change and make the bill better. That doesn't happen now. The Republicans put out a bill or the Democrats put out bill. It goes to committee. Everyone's reluctant to put an amendment on it. Heck, back in the 90s, we did hand amendments on the floor. Scott Jensen, Mark Duff. You know, we would be listening to the speeches, the testimony, and we'd say, hey, okay, in order to make this bill better, let's do this amendment. And then we'd get some Democrats to sign onto it or whatever, and they'd pledge to then vote for it. And you don't see that anymore. And it just, I don't know why, but the reluctance of the two sides to even sit down and do an amendment that will make the bill better. And just say, well, we'll hash it out at the rulemaking process or anything. I think that that's sad.

[00:14:57] **Speaker 1** You were here when the maps were redrawn in the 2010s, and then obviously you came back in after the maps for drawn once again and changed the outlook of your seat. What is the impact of redistricting on the type of politician that represents a certain area?

[00:15:15] **Speaker 2** Well, I don't know how we fix it, but if everyone says the iOS system and all that. But yes, I was here. The maps, there's no doubt in my mind that the maps were created in such a way to help the party in charge, which at that time was the Republicans. I was also here when the Democrats did it. So similar results. Uh, DOW! A bunch of years later, these maps came out. As I understand it, it went through the courts and everything. And Governor Evener finally involved himself. And at the end of the day, the tie beat and everything, so the Republicans just kind of said, yeah, we'll take that. That's the best map we're going to get. But there's no doubt in my mind that these maps have kind of, you know, you could say the word gerrymandering back When we did it, then you could say the word gerrymandering. This past year with the governor, these maps. There's no doubt in my mind that technology has gotten so much better that it's almost Star Wars stuff where they can take neighborhoods and they can identify Republicans, Democrats, blah, blah. They can narrow this down to the voters and they know which neighborhoods to put in, which neighborhoods leave out to make it a stronger. And there's no doubt in my mind that this... District that I represent, I'm not supposed to be here. The Democrats were pretty gleeful when the maps came out because they had the 53rd check box in their party. And then I decided to run. And my years of service, my years as mayor, people know I'm a pretty reasonable guy and I was able to win. But there's no doubt in my mind that, you know, who's ever in charge, they get to do the maps. And it has a... Long-lasting impact on whichever party's in charge. So, I mean, people have told me that they're more fair maps now, but clearly, you know, they were done in such a way to help. I hear rumor now that they might try to change the congressional maps. They're not doing that for fun. They're doing that to give them a competitive advantage, and that's what the redistricting does, and I don't know how to fix it, but. It would be great if someone came up with a more fairer way to do it than it's being done now.

[00:17:48] **Speaker 1** Is it fair, though, to say that you wouldn't be here today if the maps hadn't been redrawn to make it a district where Republicans needed you to run in order to win it?

[00:17:57] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I mean, this wasn't in my wife and my plan to do this. I was happy being semi-retired, running a business, and watching my grandkids play baseball and hockey. But yeah, I came back because...

[00:18:14] **Speaker 1** Well, how did you did you get recruited out of that?

[00:18:16] **Speaker 2** I think some people talk to me some people people talk

[00:18:22] **Speaker 1** Well, you know how to read a book.

[00:18:23] **Speaker 2** Some of the leaders talked to me and asked if I'd have any interest. Numerous people said to me, Dean, there's only one guy who can win the seat. And it just got me thinking. And it is important who's in charge here. You know, the majority party has a lot more power. And the second best job I had being mayor was being chair of finance committee because that taught me all about government. And I love government. I hate politics. But government is important, and government is something that, you know, I learned at a very young age, and I had people like Mike Ellis, who had a blackboard on the wall, who'd teach me about the finances. But you know and you know we knew, I knew that the Republicans were not going to do well this election, but I didn't want them to see them lose the majority either, so that brought me back, and said you know what, I can win that seat. But $3.8 million against you every day, getting your head pounded in. Every day, both parties, Republicans and Democrats, because I watched ads from both parties all over the state, lies, fabrications, it's just not good. And there's nothing you can do about it. I mean, at night, I'm not afraid to say, my wife and I would go, what the hell did we do this for? Because you'd come home at night after watching the TV, You know, heaven, you know. 10 ads during a TV show that were just blatant lies. And there's nothing you can do about it. It's no fun. It's not fun for you. It's so fun for your family. And then the hardest part is when you get here, and then people say, are you going to be bipartisan? Can we work together? Well, you just spent three months, four months, telling people in my district what a bad person I was. And really, people, even the Democrats know. Dean Carver's not a bad person to work with. And I'm one of the Republicans who can work with the other side. I'm of the other Republicans who understand, you know, we got a lot of things done when we had a split legislature years ago. And we're still doing good things. But the problem is, you know they're all coming from one side. So I wish all that would change. But I don't know. We'll see what happens.

[00:20:39] **Speaker 1** So you are the chair of corrections. Is that something you requested? Is there, do you have a mission in your second wind here?

[00:20:46] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I thought about that. It was funny because people said, did you have any demands? And I said, yeah. I wanted my seniority back, because I wanted a nice office, which I got. I wanted a good parking spot. But I was just happy to be here. But I could have done a lot of things here. But at the end of the day, I said you know what? There's going to be some, I think, from what I heard, there's going be some big changes, corrections. I was here in my early 90s. When we had sent prisoners out of state, I was on the Public Safety and Corrections Committee. I was one of eight legislators who went to the other states to view the conditions that our inmates were under, because we didn't have enough space here. And came back. We built Stanley, a private prison. And that didn't work out very well. So it's now a Wisconsin prison. But I said, you know what? Corrections is going to have some pretty heavy stuff this time. So I requested it. And now, as it turns out, the governor's in his budget. You know, it's a very complex problem, and he has a solution that's gonna cost a lot of money. But, you know, at the end of the day, closing Green Bay, I'm touring it on Thursday morning. I toured Wapond last week, and Green Bay needs to come down. So we need to figure out, here's another issue that Republicans and Democrats, this shouldn't be political, but we should be able to figure it out a way. How to make sure our inmates are safe and our correctional officers are safe. So I'm dedicated to doing that.

[00:22:21] **Speaker 1** Is it fun to have a purpose where you can see something that may be a little easier to get consensus on?

[00:22:28] **Speaker 2** Yeah, and that's what I'm best at, you know, I mean, is getting people together. I mean years and years ago, I still remember Mike Ellis. He'd say, he'd tell the governor, whether it be Tommy Thompson, Scott Walker, get three Republicans, three Democrats, and two people from the governor's staff, go in that room and don't come out till you got it figured out. And if you came out a little bit mad, and the Democrats came out little bit bad, and the governor office weren't happy. You probably had a good process. But everyone had buy-in then, and everyone didn't get what they want. And people around here need to understand, sometimes taking three quarters of a loaf is still better than getting nothing. And so both sides need to do that. But there's so much at stake every two years with an election always around the corner that they don't wanna work together. That's frustrating for me. But I do have a purpose here. I have a a purpose to make sure Needham and Ashen, parts of Appleton, that I represent, get good representation, that constituent services, I got my old staff back. And so, you know, the lobby core all knows who Dean Coffert is, the government relations people. And I feel good because people are genuinely happy to see me back and I can add something to the mix here because I think historical knowledge is Fred Risser. You know, perfect example, he was here a long time. He brought a lot to the table, and I think I can do that too.

[00:24:02] **Speaker 1** You're not going to be here as long as Brenda is, are you? Well.

[00:24:03] **Speaker 2** Well, Fred Risser was elected the year I was born, 1957. So this is a short-term gig for me. And that's what's making me feel at ease. That's what makes me exciting, because I know that I'm going to only be here two or four years, probably four. I'm gonna try for four. But I don't have an agenda. I don't have to appease anybody. I can do what Dean Crawford thinks is right, whether it's Republican or Democrat. And I've been known to lead my party. But I will be with them 95% of the time. But I also will chastise them when I think they're doing something wrong. I will try to convince them to massage it. I've already had some successes where I've said, in caucus, I've say, you know, your bill's OK, but this needs to change. And they respect me enough to make that change and say, hey, we're OK with that. It makes it better. I do have a purpose for a couple years or four years, and that's to try to make this place better, try to run this place better and see if we can't change the political climate. I don't know if we're going to be able to because there's too darn much money involved in politics, but I'm going to try.

[00:25:20] **Speaker 1** Maybe that's a part of moderation in politics that people don't see from the outside is in the old days You could vote against a bill or you could have debate it and people would hear your public opinions now If you're working in private caucus or closed caucus behind closed doors to make a bill better No one comes out afterwards and say Dean had a great idea that made this so much more palatable

[00:25:41] **Speaker 2** It's a good point. Sometimes closed caucuses aren't closed, because sometimes that kind of stuff does get out. But it's funny you bring that up, because in 1986, Bob Zieglerbauer, who was a Democrat, Dean Crawford, who is a Republican, had a bill to abolish closed caucus. There were two people signed on, just the two authors. Nobody else signed on. So it is what it is. But if you could do it more in the public, it might be helpful. But everything is closed caucus now on both sides. Both sides do it, you know, this is, I'm not picking on Republicans, I'm picking on the Democrats.

[00:26:19] **Speaker 1** Republicans have been in power so long people can't remember when Democrats were in power.

[00:26:23] **Speaker 2** Exactly, and it makes me think, and I talk about this when I speak at the Kiwanis Club and things like that. I mean, years ago you would actually, during debate, you would maybe go in the parlor with a Democrat and a couple of Republicans, and the leaders would even say, hey, if you guys could work something out, do it. And we'd work it out, and we'd ask to delay the bill maybe for an hour. And then we'd go in the back, work it out, and we'd come out and we would have a product. We'd have a motion made up by legislative council and we fix it. We'd a pretty good project, pretty good product that people would, you know, maybe all vote for. We'd become a voice vote. So the process was a lot different and I wish we could go back to that and I'm trying every day, I try, but it's gotta be a two-way street too. And you can't have the Democrats always saying no. And you get to have the Republicans always saying, yes. Everything seems to be black and white around here. And there's no gray. And that's frustrating.

[00:27:26] **Speaker 1** Representative Coffert, thanks for your time.

[00:27:27] **Speaker 2** Hey, I enjoyed it, I'm happy I'm back and I'm excited. You know, you look the same as you did years ago.

[00:27:34] **Speaker 1** Well, so do you. You don't really... No one would guess that you came in in the 90s.

[00:27:38] **Speaker 2** Somebody said that to me, one of the, you know, I've had so many people come here and say hi and, you know, stop in with their issues. They say you look the same and I'll say, you know, well I'm not using any coloring yet, so I'm thoroughly excited to be back.

[00:27:55] **Speaker 1** You didn't learn hair treatment from Michael?

[00:27:58] **Speaker 2** Oh, don't put that in. All right, thank you.

[00:28:01] **Speaker 1** Thank you. Every time I drive north, I see...