

COMMENTARY: Massachusetts deserves more from its Senate candidates

JoAnn Fitzpatrick, October 31, 2009

QUINCY —Who'd have thought the contest for U.S. Senate in Massachusetts would revolve around who's best at horse trading? That was the catch phrase in the less-than-inspiring debate among four Democrats hoping to succeed Ted Kennedy.

I had hoped for more; the voters deserved better questions and better answers. And they deserve a next time.

Monday night's was the only televised debate scheduled for what will be a job for life. None of the four – seasoned politicians Martha Coakley and Mike Capuano and newcomers Alan Khazei and Steve Pagliuca – is well known, yet given the state's heavily Democratic leanings the Dec. 8 primary could decide the Senate seat. Remember, it's an open primary in which independents can take a ballot.

Congressman Capuano is the testosterone candidate. He's part of the boys' club in the House of Representatives and, by God, that entitles him to move on up. Capuano is proud of his skills as a wheeler and dealer and crowed that no one can top that experience. To illustrate the point, Capuano was at a Boston fundraiser in September for his buddy Rep. John Murtha of Pennsylvania, the champion pork barreler in the House, now serving his 19th term. Do we want a senator whose chief boast is being part of this "in crowd"? I think not.

The other candidates were all for horse trading when necessary but they mostly described it as making partnerships with lawmakers with interests and constituencies different from theirs.

Missing from the debate was mention of the majesty of the Senate. The highly partisan deliberations of recent years do not conjure up the image of Daniel Webster and others of his stature but the upper house is still a place vastly different from the House. Here is where great issues are shaped – civil rights, for example – and where great leaders are honed.

But Monday's conversation was about nuts and bolts and bringing bucks to Massachusetts. Coakley soared only when the topic was law; she's a terrific prosecutor and it shows. Let's reward that experience by keeping her in a job she knows and does well. Steve Pagliuca was memorable mostly for saying, "I agree with Mike." Personal millions won't be enough to vault him into contention.

Alan Khazei, co-founder of City Year, is the least known

of the four but he showed in the debate why he's the class of the field. On how to stimulate the still-faltering economy, he had specific plans for tax breaks to help struggling small businesses. To avoid adding to the deficit, he would restore Clinton-era tax levels.

While Capuano touts the value of rubbing elbows with those who know how Washington works – think lobbyists and special interest PACs – Khazei rejects contributions from both. He hopes to win with a steady stream of contributions from small donors, the way Barack Obama did. So far, the strategy is moderately successful. In the first campaign finance reporting period, the newcomer collected \$1 million-plus, compared with just over \$2 million for the far better known Coakley.

This week Kahzei brought what he calls "a moral issue" – casino gambling – to the campaign. Opponents were quick to dismiss the topic as being more gubernatorial than senatorial, but they are wrong. The people of Massachusetts expect their representatives, especially their senators, to have opinions on a wide range of issues, including those they may not be voting on. The state has considered and rejected the lure of gambling profits in the past but is edging closer to reversing that stand because of our current economic problems.

We've turned things around before because of a highly educated workforce and we can do it again.

Khazei understands that the momentous decision on casino gambling will have a profound impact on this state. It's a big-picture issue, the kind senators should think about.

If we have learned anything in the last 20 turbulent years, it is that we cannot predict what challenges lie ahead for our elected leaders.

We need the best this rich state has to offer, someone unafraid to appeal to our nobler instincts, someone who recognizes us as citizens and not members of groups. This election is about leadership, not horse trading, and Khazei is the candidate with the qualities we need.

JoAnn Fitzpatrick can be reached at joannfzptrck@yahoo.com.