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The Salt Lake Tribune

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Sen. Margaret Dayton: Conservative steps into legislative spotlight

By Cathy McKittrick
and Dan Harrie
The Salt Lake Tribune

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Orem Republican Margaret Dayton always has been reliably conservative in her 12 years in the Utah Legislature, but this year there's something different - she's wielding newfound right-wing clout.

It may partly stem from the fact Sen. Chris Buttars, R-West Jordan, is lying low in the wake of intense criticism over his racially charged comments on the Senate floor. But Dayton, a House member for a decade, also has stepped up the pace in her second session in the Senate, engaging in more high-profile debates and tripling her sponsorship of bills.

From denouncing an esteemed high-school program as "anti-American," to bemoaning discrimination against white Christian males, she appears to have come into her own as the omnipresent champion of the Utah Eagle Forum.

Gayle Ruzicka, longtime president of the morals-crusading Forum, makes no secret of her

Click photo to enlarge

Sen. Margaret Dayton signs to students of the Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind, who were in the gallery during a session at the Capitol.

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admiration for Dayton.

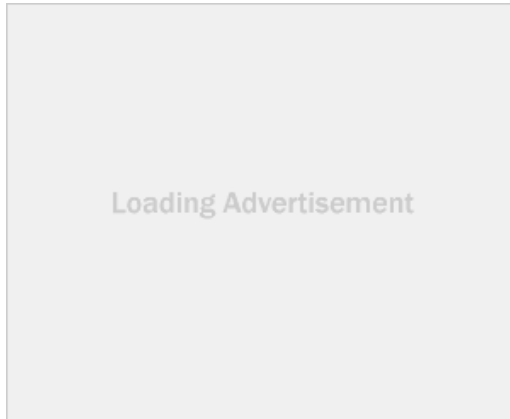
"Margaret is a great legislator," said Ruzicka. "She certainly has a good conservative voting record, but beyond that, she takes strong positions."

Controversial, too. But she also leaves some colleagues bristling over what they say is a kind of hit-and-run style that doesn't always make for a fair fight.

United Nations coup

Dayton waited until a House-approved funding bill for the state's International Baccalaureate

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programs came up for a vote in her Senate Education Committee to voice her concerns about it. She said there was a perceived anti-American philosophy woven into the I.B. curriculum - all part of a U.N. agenda.

Two other lawmakers - Sens. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, and Darin Peterson, R-Nephi - joined Dayton that day to vote no, producing the 3-3 tie that caused the bill to crash.

Rep. Carol Spackman Moss, D-Holladay, sponsor of the bill and a retired teacher, said Dayton's remarks took her by surprise.

The day following the vote, Dayton's intern delivered Eagle Forum information - with "inflammatory" passages highlighted - to Moss, with a note apologizing that she had not had time to talk to her before the committee vote.

As chairman of the committee, however, Dayton had had control over when the bill was presented.

After the bill's demise, a flood of public support convinced lawmakers to appropriate \$100,000 in ongoing funds for I.B.

Gov. Jon Huntsman, an I.B. fan, described its curriculum as extraordinary and well-rounded. His son is enrolled in the I. B. program at Salt Lake City's West High School.

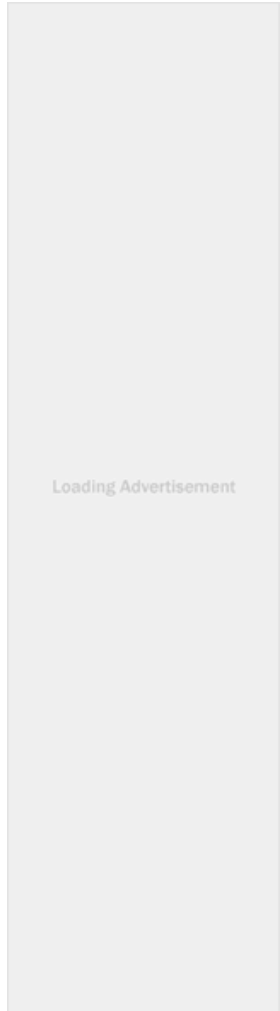
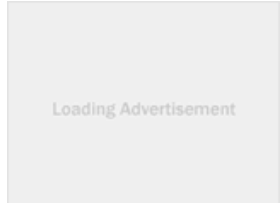
"I asked him the other night if they were force-feeding him information about the United Nations," Huntsman said with grin. "He assured me they were not."

Much earlier in her legislative career, Dayton had been on the receiving end of the kind of sucker-punch lawmaking opponents now say she uses.

Then-Senate President Lane Beattie made a rare public apology on the Senate floor to Dayton in 1999 over one such incident. Beattie had called then-Rep. Dayton over to the Senate for a private discussion of her amendment repealing a hospital patient tax. As soon as she stepped away, House leaders called up the bill and passed it.

Opponents of one of Dayton's bills this session, aimed at regulating licensed direct-entry midwives, complain of similar stealth tactics.

Midwife melee



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Dayton is a former labor and delivery nurse who is married to now-retired obstetrician-gynecologist Lynn Dayton. She ran SB93 at the request of the Utah Medical Association.

While touted as a consensus bill, some questioned whether all negotiations were conducted in good faith.

"It was represented in the Senate Health and Human Services Committee that both sides would sit down and work together," said Sen. Scott McCoy, D-Salt Lake City.

"Apparently a meeting happened, a substitute appeared - the midwives had never seen it - and we were debating it on the Senate floor.

"To me, that's a bad process."

Suzanne Smith, a licensed direct-entry midwife active in the legislative process, said she and her colleagues were shut out of the version of Dayton's bill that passed the Senate.

"They'd undone a lot of what we wanted," Smith said.

Feeling steamrolled, the midwives and their clients fought back by contacting lawmakers.

Rep. Jackie Biskupski, D-Salt Lake City, proffered the bill's seventh substitute, one she said restored the agreement negotiated between the UMA and midwives.

But Biskupski noted Dayton's hands-off approach at that point. The sponsor didn't show up for a debate last Wednesday in the House Health and Human Services Committee, where the substitute bill advanced to the House floor.

"She didn't want to present her bill [to the House committee]," Biskupski said. "I've heard she's leaving it [to] the UMA and what they want - it's her name on the bill, but UMA's bill."

Dayton, defended SB93 and her work on it in an e-mail, writing "It is disappointing to me that the lay midwives ever lobbied for licensure."

That landmark legislation, viewed as a victory by Utah midwives, passed in 2005. Hence the need for SB93, Dayton said.

"Licensure is a privilege granted by the state with regulations," she wrote, adding that her bill would help define those regulations.

Getting personal

Dayton, while prominent in so many controversies during this 45-day lawmaking session, is an intensely private person - at least when it comes to the news media.

She initially declined to grant an interview for this story, saying in an e-mail that many of her colleagues better deserved the attention. Later, she agreed to answer some questions submitted by e-mail, but mostly focused on issues.

Beyond revealing that she has "been happily married for over 30 years and [has] many children and grandchildren," she provided scant personal information.

Dayton, 58, is one of just four women in the Utah Senate, which long has been referred to on Capitol Hill as the "old boys' club." She is the sole member of the upper chamber to list her occupation as simply "homemaker."

Political heroes she named were the reliable Founding Fathers and conservative icons Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

Dayton also quoted Martin Luther King Jr. in explaining that she is opposed to affirmative action, saying the policy runs against the civil-rights leader's admonition to judge people on the content of their character and not the color of their skin.

But she also has promoted the idea that reverse discrimination is a growing problem - most recently in a fiery Senate floor speech against a bill proposing a registry for minority businesses aimed at helping them compete for government contracts.

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"It seems like the white male is such a burden or frustration to society," she said during debate on the Senate floor. "I really have angst with the growing discrimination towards the white male family-oriented Christian males."

Perhaps as much as any other legislator, and more than most, she views legislation through a lens of morality: judging whether each proposal works to preserve or attack "traditional values."

The perspective goes far beyond litmus-test issues of abortion and gay rights, to include such things as all-day kindergarten, child day-care regulation and federal mandates over public lands and education.

Dayton has for years been a leading opponent of President Bush's No Child Left Behind program, referring to it in a Cato Institute panel discussion in 2005 as both unconstitutional and immoral.

In 2001, she unsuccessfully fought a bill to allow women to abandon newborns at hospitals without being prosecuted by pulling out her Bible and reading from Exodus to puncture the nickname "the baby Moses bill."

This year she is Senate co-sponsor of a resolution - already passed - reaffirming the "under God" phrase in the pledge of allegiance.

While generating lots of criticism from the public at large, Dayton's approach appears to be a hit with her conservative, mostly Republican constituents.

She always won re-election easily in her House races and won nearly 70 percent of the vote in her successful ascension to the Senate in 2006.

Even McCoy, her opponent on many issues, confines most of his complaints to Dayton's tactics. "She has to represent her constituents the way she sees fit," he says. "But it's one thing to do it upfront, another to take people by surprise."

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