

**NEW PEOPLE'S ATTORNEY HAS NO SHORTAGE OF
IDEAS**
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EXPERIENCE AND AGE, BUT MIKE HATCH IS STILL RARING TO
GO TO WORK***

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As a student law clerk, Mike Hatch once filed a lawsuit that his client learned of only by reading about it in the newspaper.

It alleged false imprisonment of a Vikings fan who was stuck in a Metropolitan Stadium traffic jam for two hours after a game. And it was quickly withdrawn after the surprised "client," a prominent auto dealer, became the butt of widespread derision.

That was half a lifetime ago for Hatch, who next week will be sworn in as Minnesota's 28th attorney general, or, as he likes to call it, the people's attorney."

While Hatch's youthful impetuosity has been tempered a bit by experience and age - he turned 50 a week after the November election - Minnesota's 4 million-plus clients should probably still expect a few surprises from their new top lawyer at the State Capitol.

For example:

□ Hatch can barely wait to put an end to state litigation that he considers wasteful or foolish. Without going into specifics, he cited cases of one state agency suing another and of legal efforts to force cleanup of pollution long after it is almost surely gone.

□ He's forging links with Gov.-elect Jesse Ventura to replace the often-bitter rivalry between outgoing Attorney General Hubert Humphrey III and Gov. Arne Carlson. Hatch thinks he and Ventura won favor from voters because both stood for challenging unresponsive institutions, public and private.

□ He is planning 15 to 20 legislative proposals regarding health care and consumer rights, the issues he stressed in his campaign.

□ Although he rails against "political correctness," Hatch wants to slap civil suits on purveyors of hate crimes to express the state's moral condemnation of bigotry.

□ As the top DFL elected state official, he hopes to play a role in remaking the party from which he has been a virtual outcast for years. His first proposal: Change the name back to Democratic Party because no one knows what DFL means."

Unruly sailor

It's been a long, strange trip to the AG's office. Hatch grew up tough but unfocused in Duluth and dropped out of college for a while to ship out on a Great Lakes freighter. His merchant marine career ended at age 19, however, in a tussle with a Southern-born ship's officer over a slur on Bobby Kennedy and blacks.

"I pushed him," Hatch recalls. "He did push me first. But you're not supposed to push an officer. I didn't like the guy anyway, and he didn't like me. I got the worst of it."

Kicked off the ship, Hatch reapplied his energies to studies at the University of Minnesota-Duluth and the University of Minnesota Law School. He graduated from the latter without particular distinction in a star-studded Class of 1973 that included future U.S. Rep. Gerry Sikorski and future Minnesota Supreme Court Justice Sandra Gardebring.

By then Hatch was working at Lifson, Kelber, Abrahamson, Bruening & Weinstein. One of his duties was to pick up lunch at the Lincoln Del for a weekly ritual at Lifson - the Friday discussion of new Supreme Court rulings.

"Not many lawyers do it anymore," said Joe Abrahamson, one of the partners. "It wasn't always fun, but it certainly was stimulating. We didn't go by parliamentary rules, but at least no one punched anyone in the nose."

That may be partly because Hatch, who is seldom slow to speak, did more listening as the Lifson lawyers went at it like a "McLaughlin Group" panel.

"No matter what you said, you got challenged," he said. "But they were very much engaged in public policy issues. It was neat to see people take such pride in their profession."

Meanwhile, Hatch plunged into the play-for-keeps disputes of courtroom litigation. He took on the medical establishment by challenging a mental-health commitment and won some of the first Dalkon Shield intrauterine-device

lawsuits in Minnesota.

"We got real money, before they went bankrupt," he said. "I did civil and criminal, didn't matter. I just wanted. to try 'em."

Political beginnings

In 1974, living in Wayzata and driving a \$100 car with a law book plugging a hole in the floorboard, Hatch attended his first DFL precinct caucus. It was in Republican territory and he had little competition for election as a delegate. Within four years he was Second Congressional District chairman, leading contentious monthly meetings at the Happy Chef cafe in Mankato.

"I do like strong exchange," he said. The trouble with DFL conventions these days is they don't have strong exchange."

It wasn't always so. In 1980, he was elected state DFL chairman as a compromise between warring abortion opposition and abortion rights factions. He still occupies something of a middle ground on that issue, opposing a late-term abortion procedure - the so-called partial-birth abortion - but supporting public financing of abortions for the poor.

The DFL was reeling from disaster at the polls in 1978, it was deep in debt and its Minneapolis headquarters was in foreclosure. Hatch, who at first thought he could be a part-time chairman, soon shut down his growing law practice and dug into fund-raising and party-building.

On his watch, the DFL regained the Minnesota House and the governor's residence, and Gov. Rudy Perpich rewarded Hatch with an appointment as commerce commissioner. He spent seven years in the job, strengthening a once-obscure office into a tough and sometimes controversial regulator of banks and insurance companies.

"He's very focused and dedicated," said former Attorney General Warren Spannaus, like Hatch a one-time DFL state chairman and gubernatorial hopeful. "He'll be an activist attorney general, like Skip Humphrey and me and Walter Mondale."

In 1990, Hatch challenged Perpich, whom he still reveres as his political mentor, for the DFL gubernatorial nomination. Perpich won their primary election, before being beaten by Republican Arne Carlson in November, but Hatch was marked as a DFL traitor.

'A strong Democrat'

Hatch went back to practicing law, building a modest fortune and a reputation for aggressive expertise in health-insurance litigation. He ran for governor again in 1994, this time narrowly losing the primary election to DFL endorsee John Marty.

Hatch hasn't been a DFL convention delegate since 1982. Running for attorney general, he spent all of 30 minutes at this year's convention, just to greet old friends. Naturally, he wasn't endorsed, but he won the primary and general elections handily.

"I consider myself a strong Democrat," Hatch says now. "I love the Democratic Party, but it does need dramatic change. As it stands now, the endorsing process is the high altar of political correctness.

"The purpose of a party is to define issues and support candidates who stand for them. That's why the party should debate the whole platform every two years. It doesn't now. Special-interest groups have done their best to exclude people from the process, and now they're irrelevant."

Hatch isn't sure how much clout his new \$93,000-a--year job will lend his desire to reform the DFL, but he's already shaking things up at the attorney general's office. He has eliminated an entire management echelon of five policy directors, saying the AG's policies should flow mainly from the governor's office.

After asking each lawyer to summarize his work in writing, he's been plowing through 2,000 pages of responses. "There's more public policy impact in those 2,000 pages than in a legislative session," he said. "It's enormous."

Once he is sworn in,. Hatch plans to meet with each of his 200-plus lawyers at least once every three months and with their supervisors once a week. You have to be engaged to motivate public--sector employees," he said. Its very much high--touch. You can't do it by e-mail."

Strong management is necessary, he says, to implement his vision of an aggressive attorney general's office.

When people are being trod upon and falling through the cracks, the people's attorney ought to be their champion," he said. But he's not rushing into anything, either. On his key campaign issue, health care reform, he said, "Give me 60 days."