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DOUG JOHNSON

1942-2022

A DFL giant and fighter for the Range

Longtime legislator led the region's transition from a mining-based economy.

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Iron Range political giant Doug “Dougie” Johnson, a political everyman who worked for everything he had in life, including the ability to walk, shaped Minnesota tax policy for a generation and influenced the DFL Party until his final days.

Johnson died Monday at age 80 at a hospital in Cook, Minn. He had been weakened for the past decade and didn't recover from a bout of pneumonia that was diagnosed Oct. 18, his wife, Denesse Johnson, said Thursday.

During his 32 years in the Legislature, Johnson championed his native Iron Range with a grin and a wily glint in his eye. Even as his health declined, he fought for the party, advising Grant Hauschild, the candidate whose narrow victory helped the DFL reclaim the Senate majority in Tuesday's election.

“Public service appealed to him because he felt he could help people. That was always his reason for existing,” Denesse Johnson said.

She said her husband was especially focused on helping the Iron Range successfully

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transition from a mining-driven economy. "He told me he wanted his legacy to be full employee parking lots all over the Range," she said.

For years, Johnson was considered among the two or three most powerful senators behind DFL Majority Leader Roger Moe, who represented rural northwestern Minnesota.

Despite his status, he was addressed by almost everyone simply as "Dougie." Johnson was a moderate-to-conservative DFLer, an opponent of abortion and an advocate for gun owners.

Johnson came from modest roots, the son of Irene and Oscar, a truck driver. He grew up in a tiny house in Cook and was diagnosed with polio at 14 months. His parents initially couldn't afford a brace for his legs so his father made a tiny cart to help him get around, his wife said.

For the rest of his life, Johnson required a full-leg brace that made walking cumbersome and slow. His defining physical trait, however, was a smile invariably described as cherubic. And he was an upbeat presence in any room, whether a packed tax conference committee session or a one-on-one interview.

"You never knew behind that nice smile what he was plotting," Denesse Johnson said.

Born in 1942, Johnson graduated from Cook High School in 1960, earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Minnesota Duluth and a master's from the University of Wisconsin-Superior. Elected mayor of Cook at age 23, he also worked as a high school guidance counselor.

As a young mayor, he got to know Rudy Perpich, then a state senator from Hibbing. When Perpich ran for lieutenant governor in 1970, he encouraged Johnson to run for an open legislative seat and introduced him to key political activists. Their assistance helped Johnson to victory.

He served three terms in the House and began his Senate tenure in 1977.

Well into adulthood, he lived with his parents. "I never did a lot of dating," he told the Star Tribune in 1998. "I did a lot of hunting and fishing. I was doing a lot of other things. I just never wanted to leave. I felt comfortable there. It was a good financial arrangement, and I enjoyed my parents so much."

Johnson helped care for

A giant in the DFL and a champion for the Iron Range

his father, who died in 1986, and then his mother in the 1990s. During legislative sessions, he'd make extra meals on weekends and put them in the freezer so she could heat them up during the week while he was in St. Paul.

A populist when he entered the Legislature, Johnson moderated considerably and co-sponsored the bill that helped build the Mall of America in Bloomington.

Johnson's bills granted tax cuts to business property, landlords, owners of high-valued homes and cabin owners. He traced his transformation to the economic upheaval on the Range.

"It was an education for me that there had to be a closer working relationship between the public sector and the private sector," he said in 1998.

Serving as chair of the Senate Tax Committee for 20 years, he helped establish Minnesota as one of the highest-tax states in the nation. Johnson countered that the state system was also one of the fairest based on residents' ability to pay.

"I'm proudest of fighting for a fair tax system, based on ability to pay ... and bringing jobs to northeastern Minnesota," he told reporters in his Senate office in 2002 when he announced his retirement.

Banking on his legislative experience and populist charm, Johnson entered the 1998 DFL gubernatorial primary billed as "My Three Sons." Hubert H. "Skip"



Doug "Dougie" Johnson

Humphrey won the primary but eventually lost the general election to Jesse Ventura. Johnson finished third in the primary, behind Mike Freeman but just ahead of Mark Dayton and Ted Mondale.

Former Minnesota House Speaker Bob Vanasek, Johnson's roommate in St. Paul for 17 legislative sessions, said of Johnson in 1998 that he didn't initially come off as brilliant.

"What he was doing, though, was scoping you out," Vanasek said. "If you were to sit down and negotiate with him, your first impression was: I'm going to come away with all the marbles. If that was your first impression, you'd be shocked to find out you come away with very few."

When Johnson retired from the Legislature in 2002, he moved to his home on Lake Vermilion in Tower with Denesse, who had been widowed for four years when they married in 1996.

The couple ran a political consultancy for about a decade after Johnson's retirement, but they ended that as they were slowed by health challenges.

In later years, Johnson

was happy to sit in his brown leather chair, watch CNN and solve the world's problems, his wife said.

Politics continued to pull Johnson, and he endorsed and advised Hauschild, the Hermantown DFLer who on Tuesday won election by 1.6 percentage points to the seat Johnson held for more than two decades. Denesse Johnson said Hauschild called months ago and asked if he could come by to talk to Johnson, who welcomed such visits and conversations.

"It was about forming relationships. It was about how diverse the district is," Hauschild said of their discussions. In remarks at the Capitol this week, Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan said Hauschild's narrow victory, reclaiming the seat for the DFL, was especially meaningful because Johnson had once held it.

Johnson was preceded in death by his parents and his brother, Robert, who lived in Beaverton, Ore.

Besides his wife, he is survived by children Nicole Nelson of Brooklyn Park and Alan Hoole of Tower; grandchildren Brady (Andrew) Hernandez of Champlin, Jenna Hoole of Eveleth and Barrett Walker of Brooklyn Park; great-grandson Benjamin; and sister-in-law Judy Johnson of Beaverton, Ore.

At Johnson's request, services will be private.

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