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GOP legislator's remarks draw DFL protest

Complaint filed after he refers to DFLer's 'irreligious left views' during prayer debate

By Patricia Lopez Baden
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House DFLers filed an ethics complaint Thursday against Rep. Arlon Lindner, R-Corcoran, for calling a Jewish DFL House member part of the "irreligious left" during a tempestuous debate on prayer.

House Minority Leader Tom Pugh, DFL-South St. Paul, said Lindner's remarks were "one of the most shocking displays of insensitivity and intolerance that any of us can remember."

It's rare for anything said on the House floor to trigger a formal complaint, but DFLers said they intend to prove that Lindner's remarks "brought the House into disrepute," which could be a violation of House rules on conduct.

The complaint will be referred to the House Ethics Committee by Speaker Steve Sviggum, R-Kenyon, and could have a public hearing as early as next week.

Lindner's remarks came during a floor fight late Wednesday over whether the prayer that opens every House floor session should be non-denominational.

Up until last year, such prayers were denominational. Then House Republicans, as part of the session's opening prayer ceremony, invited a religious choir that ringed the House chamber

singing the Apostle's Creed. Some House members were visibly uncomfortable with what they considered an overly religious display and pushed through a rule change that made the prayer nondenominational.

The change has irked religious conservatives in the GOP caucus, and on Wednesday they began the fight to reverse the rule.

Rep. Michael Paymar, DFL-St. Paul, was among those who defended the non-denominational prayer. "I would like to be part of that moment where a religious leader gets up before us and has a prayer," said Paymar, who is Jewish. "But I would like that to be nondenominational, and I would like it to be respectful of who I am."

Lindner then responded to Paymar: "You know we're told there's one God and one mediator between God and man. The man Christ Jesus. And most of us here are Christians. And we shouldn't be left, not able to pray in the name of our God. . . . And if you don't like it, you may have to like it. Or just don't come. I don't come sometimes for some prayers here. . . . We have that privilege, and you need to exercise it. But don't impose your irreligious left views on me."

There were gasps and some hissing, and Rep. Matt Entenza, DFL-St. Paul, asked Lindner to "rethink the last remark you made." Lindner did not



The DFL complaint against Rep. Arlon Lindner will go to the House Ethics Committee.

respond, and afterward Entenza offered a "protest of dissent" petition that was entered into the House journal. Sixty members signed it, including eight Republicans, Entenza said.

On Thursday, Pugh, Entenza and several others said the petition was not enough. "This was an anti-Semitic remark, attacking not only Representative Paymar, but the religious beliefs of thousands of Jewish people across this state," he said. "And that is so fundamentally unacceptable that the Ethics Committee has to decide what the appropriate course of conduct should be."

The committee has wide latitude and could recommend anything from a formal reprimand on the House floor to exoneration. The full House then would vote on the recommendation, said Rep. Ann Rest, DFL-New Hope.

Lindner said Thursday that he didn't think the ethics complaint was necessary. He said he didn't intend to insult Jews. He also remained unrepentant and said he would not apologize for his remarks.

"I love Jewish people," Lindner

said. "I didn't intend those remarks to be anti-Semitic. I certainly didn't intend it that way."

But, he said, he would not apologize to Paymar. "He's referred to me before as being part of the Christian right. I think he owes me an apology. I'm looking at Representative Paymar as just a person with evidently some thin skin. I don't see how he could have been bothered by the music we had last year."

Paymar said many House Republicans came up to him privately on Wednesday. "They were absolutely appalled, and apologized on behalf of their caucus," he said. "I don't think Representative Lindner's remarks reflect the view of the Republican majority."

However, he said, "This is an issue the Republican Party is going to have to deal with. They can't say to non-Christian members, 'If you don't like the prayer, then get out and sit in the retiring room.' Representative Lindner has to be held accountable for his comments."

House Majority Leader Tim Pawlenty, R-Eagan, said that Lindner had been intemperate, but that he was unsure that his comments warranted an ethics complaint, something typically reserved for more grievous acts.

"His remarks were inflammatory and perhaps inappropriate," Pawlenty said. "His remarks do concern me. We often have heated debate, but we need to maintain a level of decorum."

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