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New congressman Mike Quigley makes an impact with move against Charles Rangel

by Greg Hinz

Congressman Mike Quigley received a special gift of sorts last Wednesday, which happened to be the first anniversary of his election to Rahm Emanuel's old seat on Chicago's North Side.

The gift: The head — metaphorically speaking — of Charles Rangel, who stepped down as chairman of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee a week after Mr. Quigley and a couple of others became the first House Democrats to publicly ask the mighty chairman to go amid a major ethics probe.

So it has gone since Mr. Quigley went to Washington.

At 5-foot-7 and 150 pounds, he's brought to Capitol Hill the same sort of damn-the-consequences, into-the-boards style he first displayed as an amateur hockey player and later translated into political terms as a reform member of the Cook County Board.

"It's harder to pass bills if you make waves," the House freshman concedes. "But if you just act like a lemming, you don't really change things."

The Rangel episode certainly is part of a pattern.

On the county board, Mr. Quigley developed a real talent both for producing brilliant research papers on how to cut county spending and for offending powerful pols such as Mayor Richard M. Daley, Cook County Board President Todd Stroger and Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan. But he survived, got some stuff done and even might have moved up to board president if another reformer, Forrest Claypool, hadn't blocked his way.

In Washington — a place that relies on tradition and connections even more than Chicago does — Mr. Quigley has been his hard-hitting self.

In October, Mr. Quigley lined up with Republicans in demanding that a House oversight committee issue subpoenas for a probe into possible sweetheart mortgages extended by failed Countrywide Financial to influential politicians. Among those who got VIP loans was the chairman of the committee involved, New York Democrat Edolphus Towns. Mr. Towns caved.

In Washington, Mr. Quigley has been his hard-hitting self. Then there's the jobs bill that U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi wanted Mr. Quigley to vote for in a showdown with Republicans. He said no.

"They gave us a \$176-billion bill at 9 and expected it to vote at 5. It wasn't even paid for," he explains. "It was (just) designed to give members something to take home and talk about over a holiday weekend."

All of that certainly gets attention from us folks in the media. But is it good politics?

For what it's worth, both Mr. Emanuel and Speaker Pelosi declined the opportunity to comment

for this piece. One source close to the speaker says Mr. Quigley's jobs-bill vote did not go down well.

But an Illinois colleague who's been known to make his own waves, Rep. Luis Gutierrez from the adjoining 4th District, says it's "refreshing" both to him and potentially to voters that personal ambition does not top Mr. Quigley's agenda. And "in this environment," in which voters seem to hate all politicians and turnover in Congress is rising, a bit of insurgency may be good politics, Mr. Gutierrez adds.

Mr. Quigley seems acutely aware that he risks being morphed into a goody-goody professional reformer. He has a wider agenda, which includes everything from promoting gay rights to lifting U.S. visa restrictions on visitors from Poland, and, in person, is anything but an ideologue — even if he does sleep in his House office at night instead of renting an apartment in pricey Washington. When things get rough, he goes and chats with a congressman from New York who is a fellow hockey zealot, or sits and watches folks like Georgia Congressman John Lewis — "a father of the civil rights movement" — walk by.

But on the reform stuff, he's not backing off. "Government's at a turning point," he says. "We've lost the public's trust. Without the public's trust, it's very difficult to govern."

He has a point. Before Messrs. Quigley and Emanuel, the 5th District seat was held by the biggest inside wheeler-dealer of them all, Dan Rostenkowski. Not to mention Rod Blagojevich.

And we know what happened to them.