MPR News | Minnesota Now 'We have a voice:' Anishinaabe leader celebrates Peggy Flanagan's historic election to Senate 01M6M54PPWWCZYCNKKY7VRMZZV

NINA MOINI: Candidates all over the country made history this election by becoming firsts. Among them is Senator-elect Peggy Flanagan, who was an enrolled member of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe. She will go to Congress next year as the first Native woman elected to the United States Senate. She celebrated the win in a speech last night.

PEGGY FLANAGAN: To the daughters and to the sons, who too often are forgotten or erased, I see you.

[CHEERS]

Do not be disheartened that it took 250 years for one of us to get here.

[CHEERS]

Be inspired by the fact that, with grit and determination and the resilience of our people, whichever one of you is next, you're going to get here a lot faster.

[CHEERS]

NINA MOINI: Joining me to talk about this aspect of Flanagan's win is another Anishinaabe woman with a prominent leadership career in Minnesota. Melanie Benjamin served as chief executive of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe for about two decades, starting in 2000. She's now a tribal advisor and vice president of government relations and engagement with the firm Blue Stone Strategy. Thanks very much for your time this afternoon, Melanie.

MELANIE BENJAMIN: Boozhoo. Thank you.

NINA MOINI: Listening to Peggy Flanagan's speech, Senator-elect Flanagan, and her talking about leaving the door open for people behind you and making things easier if you can, what's your reaction to just her bringing that to her speech?

MELANIE BENJAMIN: Well, that's a strong fact. And when I think about Senator-elect Peggy Flanagan, her Anishinaabe name speaks with a strong and clear-voice woman. And that is just an example last night of her speech, that she sends strong messages. And what is so great about Peggy-- she follows through, and she will get that done.

And to send that message to our youth-- because everything we do impacts seven generations. So today, with her announcement of being senator, we're going to have such a bright future. And I think about the treaties that were signed with American Indian tribes, 400 of them, and none of them were honored. And that's a shameful history of the United States when it comes to policy with American Indian tribes.

But with Peggy Flanagan now, we have a future filled with hope. And these contracts that all of the tribes signed call treaties will be honored and respected and will be able to utilize those to advance Indian country in Minnesota and across the nation.

NINA MOINI: And Flanagan referenced, as well, to your point, just that about strengthening that and how important that has really always been to her. Can you tell us about when you first met Peggy Flanagan?

MELANIE BENJAMIN: Oh, sure. I first met her probably at the official meeting at the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, our annual powwow. And she was with Senator Wellstone and his green bus. And so we got to visit, and she really worked hard for the senator. And he was a great senator, as well as she will be.

And when I think about her advocacy over the years and her representation of school board, of young women, young girls, young boys, how we're going to now prepare our youth to step into this arena of representation and policy.

NINA MOINI: What skills and qualities do you see in Flanagan as a leader? It's taken 250 years, as she said, for someone to be in a situation like this. She's saying grit, determination. She's saying, I've been underestimated. Many people can relate to those types of sentiments. What do you think are the skills and qualities that both have gotten her here and keep her going?

MELANIE BENJAMIN: I think she is an example of servant leadership, and the values that we have are instilled in her are love and compassion for each other, our humanity, our truthfulness, our integrity, our wisdom, our bravery. All of those types of values that are important, she has those, and she shows those in everything she does.

So when I think about that leadership, how, again, it's going to impact tribes in the state of Minnesota, but also all citizens, as well, because when you love the people that you represent, you're going to work very hard. And I always go back to her Anishinaabe name speaks with a loud and strong voice, and she will have such strong voices for representation and policy influence for the state of Minnesota out in Washington, DC, as Senator.

NINA MOINI: I'm not going to quote this exactly right, but it's a story that Flanagan often tells. And she told it again in her acceptance speech about how her late father, Marvin Manypenny, had said that he was one who kind of wanted to take the systems down of oppression or status quo or how it's always been. And he said, you as my daughter, you want to try to change them from within. And she said last night that she felt like she had done that now in this newest role and this newest kind of glass ceiling that she's broken, becoming a United States senator and the first. What do you think about that balance for somebody like her?

MELANIE BENJAMIN: I think to-- when you think about her father, Marvin Manypenny, and his movement and how he wanted to make change in Indian country-- and she's doing the same. She has actually followed in his steps. But as you mentioned, she is working from the inside to make those policies change, to have a more impactful result for us in-- when I mentioned those treaties that were all broken, those 400 treaties across Indian country, now we have somebody that understands from the inside what those contracts treaties mean to Indian country. And it's very important that we-- everyone that's elected at the federal level understands federal Indian law and how that impacts we as Indian people, but also the citizens of this great country, the United States.

NINA MOINI: Will you say just a little more, Melanie, about what that impact is? Because it's structural, right, and generational?

MELANIE BENJAMIN: Right, yes. So if you look at federal Indian policy over the years-- and it started with the land grabs, and we witnessed a lot of that even in today's environment-- the threat of our children, the abuse of our women, and the taking families from their homelands and putting them into big cities that they didn't have any connection or ownership to in a sense.

But we adapted. We're resilient. And I think when you look at all those policies that were very negative towards Indian people and you think of all of that impact that it had, that so many of us grew up in poverty, we didn't know what the opportunities were for us because we were held down. And now, when you look at Peggy's leadership over the years-- and she's worked very hard, all of her years, to change that representation from the inside, to make sure that we have a voice.

And she will be that strong voice for us. And we can then, therefore, get policies that are negatively created to negatively impact Indian people. Now we have a voice. They'll say, wait a minute. Let's look at this. Is this really the best way?

And she's very strategic. She's very community oriented and wanting to have the voices of others included in her decision making, which I think is very important because you do have a wide representation of Minnesotans that you now will represent. And I think she will do that honorably and have great results for us.

NINA MOINI: Melanie, thank you so much for joining the program and sharing your reflections with us. It means a lot.

MELANIE BENJAMIN: Well, thank you for inviting me and we have good days to come. I'm very thrilled and happy about it. Thank you.

NINA MOINI: Thanks so much. Melanie Benjamin is former chief executive of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. She's now vice president of government relations with Bluestone Strategy, a native-owned consulting firm.