

Charlie, we hardly knew ye

By Jon Keller for MASSterList

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Gov. Charlie Baker's reaction to Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis's recent soulless publicity-stunt, the dumping of asylum-seeking migrants on Martha's Vineyard, set off some buzz about his future.

Not his role in helping arrange temporary housing and other services for the migrants; that was typical apolitical Baker pragmatism. It was his refusal to join the chorus of scorn for DeSantis's grandstanding that raised a few eyebrows.

After denouncing the endless politicization of an immigration debate that generates plenty of poison but no progress, Baker passed on the chance to express what is surely his profound contempt for Florida's pint-sized Pinochet. "I'm not running for president, so why engage in what is obviously a presidential debate, OK?" he told GBH News.

Local tea-leaf readers understandably wondered if this was about Baker keeping all political options open. It wouldn't be the first time he's held his tongue to preserve professional relationships and political capital.

But realistically, what political options does Baker have?

He can't run for the Senate in Massachusetts, or even in New Hampshire if he somehow wanted to try the Scott Brown gambit. The Republican brand has been toxic in federal elections for quite a while - ask Bill Weld how the R crippled him against John Kerry in 1996. And luck like what Brown enjoyed in 2010 - drawing historically-inept competition from Martha Coakley (D-Juul) - isn't likely to be repeated.

Baker is no Peter McNeeley. After three statewide campaigns and eight years running a troll gauntlet that took its toll on his family, why would he want to go 10 hapless rounds with Ayanna Pressley, Maura Healey or Marty Walsh?

A presidential or vice-presidential campaign? Sure, in some parallel universe where GOP leaders and their Fox News overlords walk erect without webbing between their fingers and toes.

Trying his luck as a Democrat? We've asked Baker about that multiple times over the years, a suggestion met by the kind of face a man makes when he enters the men's room at a long-neglected MBTA station. Some of his core convictions on taxation and crime would consign him to the right wing of the Democratic Party, a.k.a. America's most-secure witness protection program.

An independent candidacy for...something? South of Angus King, those never work.

So an educated guess is that Baker returns to the private sector next January, healing his stress wounds and padding his retirement funds while he dopes out his next move.

Baker is known to care about balancing budgets and could find a role in the movement to force federal spending restraint through a constitutional amendment. And his fundraising network could be activated on behalf of a future presidential candidate; former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley and Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan come to mind, not that either one stands a Del's Frozen Lemonade's chance in hell of breaking through the GOP's toxic fog in 2024.

But a full-on retreat from the arena? Quick, name one former governor since Frank Sargent who pulled a Greta Garbo. Mike Dukakis is still heard from. Word has it Deval Patrick still harbors presidential fantasies. (No, not making that up.) Ditto Mitt Romney. And the ink isn't even dry on Weld's last run for the White House, even if it was written in invisible ink.

So like it or not, you probably haven't seen the last of Charlie Baker, politician. Just don't hang out at any DeSantis fundraisers hoping for a sighting.

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