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### Mr. Shannon for attorney general

Two Fairfax lawmakers are vying for the job -- one wonkish, one worrying.

Wednesday, October 21, 2009

THE RACE for attorney general in Virginia is a face-off between a pair of youngish lawyers, each from Fairfax County, each elected to the General Assembly this decade, and each now running his first statewide race. The similarities end there. While the Democratic candidate, *Del. Stephen C. Shannon*, is a mainstream former prosecutor -- strait-laced, sober, earnest almost to a fault -- his Republican opponent, state Sen. Kenneth T. Cuccinelli II, is a provocative hard-liner who at times has struggled vainly to attract a single vote for his more far-fetched initiatives.

Mr. Shannon, who has a weakness for wonkish legalese, may not come across as a worldbeater, but there is no doubt he would run the attorney general's office, with its 166 lawyers, as a serious, nonpartisan agency. As a prosecutor in Fairfax County, Mr. Shannon focused on busting purveyors of child pornography. With his wife, he had previously founded the Metropolitan Washington Amber Alert program, a local chapter of a nationwide system for locating abducted children. As attorney general, Mr. Shannon would steer a responsible course on consumer protection, the environment and the advisory legal opinions that the office is frequently asked to render.

Mr. Cuccinelli is also smart and well-informed, and he has at times stood on principle, and against his own party's majority, in regard to law-and-order issues. For instance, he sided with Democratic senators in voting to relax a state law that barred prisoners from presenting courts with new evidence of their innocence (beyond DNA) more than three weeks after their conviction. This year, he bucked his own party again when he opposed legislation to expand the death penalty -- which he has otherwise advocated -- by applying it to some accomplices to murder.

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However, there is reason to worry that Mr. Cuccinelli would treat the job of attorney general as an ideological crusade. We take him at his word when he says he intends to fight with the federal government over constitutional and legislative issues that stick in his craw. In the past, he has introduced measures calling on Congress to amend the Constitution to deny citizenship to children of undocumented immigrants,

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and to subvert the First Amendment by barring journalists from knocking on the doors of bereaved families. (Those bills failed to attract any support.) He attacked the efforts of some Republican lawmakers to secure adequate funding for schools and roads. He doubts the science of global warming and casts aspersions on the motives of those who are concerned about it. He peddles outmoded, half-baked and prejudicial theories about homosexuals.

Given his sometimes bizarre and incendiary ideas, we worry that Mr. Cuccinelli would drive qualified and nonpartisan lawyers away, transform the attorney general's office into a staging ground for his pet peeves and causes, and make it an object of ridicule in a state where it has enjoyed a long run of respect.

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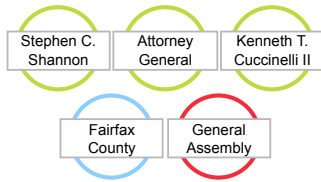


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