

West Virginia governor switches from Democrats to Republicans

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West Virginia's Democratic Governor Jim Justice announced August 3 that he was switching his party affiliation to Republican, just eight months after winning the election as a Democrat. Justice, a billionaire coal industry CEO, made the announcement in a brief appearance at a campaign-style rally for President Donald Trump in the city of Huntington Thursday night.

"I will tell you with lots of prayers and lots of thinking, today I will tell you as West Virginians that I can't help you anymore being a Democrat governor," Justice declared. "So tomorrow I will be changing my registration to Republican." The governor cited difficulties in working with the state's legislature, which has been Republican-controlled since 2014. Trump welcomed the announcement, saying Justice "showed the country that our agenda rises above left or right."

Justice then embraced Trump on-stage, stating, "This man is a good man. He's got a backbone, he's got real ideas. He cares about America, he cares about us in West Virginia." Trump gushed, "Having Big Jim as a Republican is such an honor. Fantastic man, fantastic guy."

According to media reports citing Democratic Party officials, Justice notified neither the party nor his own staff beforehand.

In a rambling statement from the Capitol Friday afternoon, Justice said, "The Democrats walked away from me. I didn't walk away from them." On his "tax reform" plan, he said, "What happened? They dove in the ditch; they left me high and dry." The "reform" in question was a Republican-endorsed plan to eliminate the state income tax, a measure that would enormously benefit the wealthy at the expense of the working class.

During a question and answer session, he justified his

switch as an effort to strengthen ties between Appalachian coal production and national security. He suggested nearly incoherent scenarios in which terrorists bombed gas pipelines and disrupted the power supply lines of the western energy companies to the eastern power grid. Justice added that glad-handing in the White House as a Republican would help him promote Appalachian coal as "a Homeland Security incentive."

Justice, the state's richest man, ran for political office for the first time in 2016. Like Trump, he touted his "outsider" status and supposed economic savvy as a billionaire businessman rather than a career politician. Both Justice and Trump made expansive campaign promises to revive the coal industry and create thousands of jobs in the state.

Also like Trump, Justice has switched party affiliation depending on the political winds, adapting to whichever party best serves his personal interests at the moment. "He was a Republican for 10 to 12 years, a Democrat for 15 to 18, then a Republican again, and most recently became a Democrat again in February 2015," noted an editorial published last year in the *Dominion Post*.

Although he ran as a Democrat, Justice declined to endorse the party's presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton, last year, instead seeking to latch his fortunes to Trump. In his inaugural address, he boasted that he was personally friends with the Trump family and pledged to work with the president to gut Environmental Protection Agency regulations on coal pollution.

It is a testament to the corrupt and rightwing character of the Democratic Party that it is seen by billionaires like Justice and Trump as essentially interchangeable with the Republican Party, depending on their own

financial or political self-interest.

It is even more an indictment of all those organizations posturing as representatives of “progressive” causes or of the working class—and in particular the trade unions—that endorsed Justice’s candidacy. Both the United Mine Workers and the AFL-CIO tripped over themselves to assure the public that a billionaire coal baron would fight for workers’ interests. “Jim’s one of the good coal operators,” UMW president Cecil Roberts declared in a television commercial endorsing the Justice campaign. After Justice’s announcement Thursday, AFL-CIO president Josh Sword issued a statement saying he was “reserving judgement about the party switch.”

West Virginia is among the poorest states in the country, with high unemployment and the lowest labor force participation rate. The state has been in a worsening revenue situation for years, with the collapse of the coal industry pushing down the severance taxes that energy companies pay to local and state governments.

Justice ran for office under slogans such as “Tired of being 50th?”—a reference to the state’s persistently poor metrics for nearly every indicator of social wellbeing—and “Jobs, Jobs, Jobs”—a departure from the national Democratic Party’s messaging, which was dominated by questions of identity and lifestyle politics and which insisted that the Obama years had led the nation into economic prosperity.

Since taking office in January, Justice has stocked his administration with lobbyists, relatives of establishment politicians, and other businessmen like himself. The Justice administration has overseen the cutting of key departmental budgets and the appointment of pro-business figures to head agencies intended to regulate industry.

While posing as a populist fighting for the poor—dangling paltry \$150 rebate checks for low-income residents—he has introduced higher taxes on gasoline and vehicle license and registration fees to attempt to increase the extraction of tax revenue from the working class. His approval rating as of late July had fallen significantly as a result of the fighting over budget items with the legislature, according to a poll by Morning Consult, cited by the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*.

Justice is notorious for unpaid taxes on his many

business ventures. In July, Kanawha County’s tax department filed four new liens against the governor for unpaid debts. Tams Management, a Justice-owned coal company in Raleigh County, owes \$971,927. On WV MetroNews’ *Talkline* program, Justice merely said that he couldn’t go into detail, but the bill would eventually be paid. “I’ve said it a thousand times over,” he insisted. “Every obligation will absolutely be fulfilled.”

Last year, an investigation by National Public Radio found the Justice family owed some \$15 million in taxes and fines across several states, a third of it owed to West Virginia. “I have done so much for so many, but that’s not what you hear all the time,” Justice recently complained to the press.



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