

Congressman Keith Ellison: Trailblazer

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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US Rep. Keith Ellison often says he's just one of the people in the struggle.

On a recent Sunday inside the Marcus Garvey House – the offices to Insight News – there was Ellison along with about 20 other people milling around having various conversations about this and that. And to the untrained eye, Ellison, in his plaid flannel shirt and blue jeans was just like everyone else – one of the people.

But of course, the Democratic congressman who represents the state's 5th Congressional District, is not *just* one of the people. Ellison, who is in his fourth term representing Minnesota's 5th, is a first, which makes him a trailblazer – whether or not he set out to be one. As the state's first – and still only – ever non-white elected to national office and the nation's first Muslim elected to Congress, Ellison's journey has not been one of being "just one of the people in the struggle."



"(In being the first) I'm not trying to make history, I'm trying to do what's right," said Ellison, who likened his first to another famous first. "Being the first carries its own weight. Jackie Robinson couldn't worry about being the first Black in the Major Leagues; he had to worry about getting hits – putting wood on that ball, because if he didn't he was going to be out of there and the

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doors for everyone else coming behind him would have closed."

Ellison's journey from Detroit, to Minneapolis, to Congress has been chronicled in his memoir, "My Country 'Tis of Thee," just released through Simon & Schuster. The 296 page book details Ellison's life in office and his journey through politics, including being called to testify in the now infamous 2011 hearings on "hate groups" held by US Rep. Peter King (R-NY), former chair of the House Committee on Homeland Security.



"Rep. Peter King wanted to have these hearings to be only about Muslims and I told him, 'Hey, if you want to have a hearing on terrorists, I'm all for it, but let's talk about the Timothy McVeighs who are out there,'" said Ellison, as he addressed the room. "I mean come on, we all know that all Muslims are not terrorists. When you talk about Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda (doesn't) love Muslims. That's who they kill the most."

Ellison's testimony during the televised hearings was credited with changing the narrative of Islam in America and stemming the wave of anti-Muslim sentiments among many Americans. According to Ellison, the hearings backfired on King.

"Peter King had a certain idea of what the next day headlines would be. He thought they would read, 'Peter King stands up the Sharia Law' but that wasn't what the headline was," said Ellison. "In many ways things changed that day."

Chair of the Progressive Caucus and in what's considered a safe House seat, some have speculated that Ellison – a high profile Democrat – wrote the book as he positions himself to run for president. According to the 50-year-old congressman, he has no such plans.

"I was approached to write the book and I agreed to write it because we need to counter all this mess that's being put out there by Glenn Beck, Ann Coulter, Michael Savage and all the rest," said Ellison, speaking of far right commentators whose positions are often viewed as extreme, bordering on hate. "I'm not looking to run for president."

Ellison said it took him about seven months to complete the book, and has already begun work

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on a follow-up.

Following the representative's remarks, he stuck around to chat with the audience and sign copies of his book, one of which went to Velva Stewart.

"He's doing a great job," said Stewart. "I'm not easy to impress. If he wasn't doing a good job I'd be saying so loudly. He made me appreciate him."