

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

Being a member of a legislative caucus is an interesting experience. When I was first elected, many longtime members explained it as being like a very close knit club, one where you experience the ups and downs of events together. After five years of membership, I'm not sure I'd say the analogy holds completely true, but it certainly does in many particulars.

Take the events of the last few weeks. The implosion of Speaker Glenn Richardson's career has cast a good deal of confusion over matters in the House Republican Caucus; but rather than scattering us, the circumstances have caused us to address and reaffirm the ideals that brought us together in the first place. This process will put some strain on us (and it should), because we are engaged in a strenuous discussion of how we ended up in this fix, and how we could have better served the people who elected us during the past two or three years. It's hard to say whether the events and rumors of those years offered anything more than a hint at what ultimately came to pass, but we are now more adamant about just how much we will tolerate in the future. These are positive developments, because they have ignited some very frank and forthright discussions about how to raise our standards of operation and openness. The whole circumstance also offers the chance to refresh our leadership under very different conditions – also a very positive opportunity. Let me explain.

Five years ago, we elected our speaker and leadership under a commonplace arrangement – on the heels of a victorious election. We did the customary thing, which was to appoint the leader of the election effort to the top job, and to more or less accept his desired slate for other positions. That's the mold that any incoming majority is hard-pressed to avoid. You end up with a dominant central figure, upon whom all can end up dependent for their position within the organization. It's a structure which, over time, becomes inflexible in the face of change, and which has great difficulty addressing problems with the conduct of the ranking member.

That's not to say there were no signs of independence within the caucus: there were members who defied directives on how to vote in DOT board member elections; one legislator who made several valiant attempts to circumvent the process in order to get a bill he deeply believed in onto the House floor; a number of folks who were part of a conservative policy group that questioned legislation and methods frequently enough to be an irritant; some individuals who refused to participate in veto overrides, out of principle; several who broke ranks and voted against a top-heavy midyear budget; and a year ago, those who mounted and supported significant challenges to top leaders in the caucus elections. With hindsight, I suppose I can take a small measure of pride in having been a participant in several of these – but such actions are sometimes called for by the simple fact that my duty to the people I serve obviously takes precedence over party line loyalty. In any case, the roots of the present attitude of the House Republicans spring from these origins.

We can and are, as a caucus, rebuilding based on the spirit of those events. I'm optimistic, because we have broken free from the top-down leadership mold. The caucus has made new leadership selections based on objective standards of character, ability and achievement. Pressure is flowing up from the members (not down from leadership) on a variety of valuable reforms: the end of Hawks who can vote in any committee; a Rules Committee constrained to no more than technical corrections to legislation; restraints on co-signing of bills by the speaker; an open door policy for all the leadership; and the list goes on.

It encourages me to see that this "club" I'm a member of is animated by a newly empowered will to do the right thing. Maybe it's a coincidence that all this is happening so close to the day when we celebrate the true birth of hope – but I consider it quite appropriate.

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