

The Post-Register

The political pulse

E-2

Idaho Falls, Idaho, Wednesday, February 3, 1982

Legislative limelights . . .

Political ambitions dominate leadership

BY BEN J. PLASTINO

Post-Register political editor

The election years always bring an extra political overture to the Idaho Legislature but this year is one of the worst of recent years.

That's because most of the legislative leadership is looking for higher offices in the coming year and every action they take has this factor in mind, rather than the merits of certain pieces of legislation.

This also applies to the top state elective officers who are either seeking re-election or are in quest for other high political offices.

* * *

The two presiding officers in either chamber, Lt. Gov. Philip E. Batt and House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls, are now locked in a contest for the Republican gubernatorial nomination. This can't help but cloud their thinking. They are naturally weakened because their colleagues know they won't be back in their same office, regardless of whether they win or lose the gubernatorial race and certainly one will be eliminated.

Then all of the top Republican leaders have greater ambitions for the 1982 session. Both Majority Leader Walter E. Little, R-New Plymouth, and the newly elected assistant Majority Leader Jack Kennebeck, R-Boise, have announced they will seek the House speakership for the 1983 session. This is contingent on their re-election and Republican House control but both prospects appear topheavy in their favor.

As if that isn't enough, Rep. Steve Antone, R-Rupert, chairman of the House Revenue and Taxation Committee, also has joined in the House leadership race.

With the same ambitions, the harmony among the House Republican leaders can't help but be less than cordial.

The House Democratic leadership is devoid of such strife but there are only 14 Democrats compared with 56 Republicans and their influence is necessarily limited. Despite this, House Minority Leader Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, gets long mileage with his small band. As of now, he has no higher political aspirations except maybe to become majority leader but chances for Democratic House control are about as good as a row boat keeping afloat in the midst of a Pacific hurricane.

The Senate leadership is almost as bad but for different reasons. Batt, considered a moderate, has been given a polite, but irregardlessly, a cool shoulder in the inner ultra conservative circles of the upper chamber. Senate President Pro Tem Reed Budge, R-Soda Springs, is known among his colleagues for his hard reactionary tactics while the two brilliant Boise floor leader attorneys, Majority Leader Jim Risch and Minority Leader Ron Twilegar, appear to show more interest in their own private businesses than in the legislative process.

On the Democratic side, the caucus chairman, Sen. Mike P. Mitchell, Lewiston, is an announced lieutenant governor candidate which also brings a certain diversion from his legislative duties.

Sen. W. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, touched on this very point when he appeared at a United Methodist Church political panel in Idaho Falls only recently and what he said is painfully true. As Merrill remarked, Budge will barely speak to Gov. Evans. This is placing personal antagonism above the welfare of the state.

The other Republican and Democratic leaders in the Senate are faithful, dedicated legislators, Assistant Majority Leader Wilson Steen, R-Glenns Ferry, and Caucus Chairman Walter Yarbrough, R-Grand View; and Assistant Minority Leader Kermit Kiebert, D-Hope.

* * *

The state's elective political family is engaged in even more political activities. Evans, Auditor Joe Williams and Treasurer Marjorie Ruth Moon, Democrats, and Secretary of State Pete T. Cennarrusa and State School Supt. Jerry Evans, Republicans, have left it clear they will seek re-election, but only Williams has formally announced.

Attorney General David L. Leroy has announced he is seeking the lieutenant governorship which also casts a deep political mantle on his activities.

It is thus against this deep political background the Legislature and top state office holders are striving to perform this year. It will indeed be surprising if they accomplish any worthwhile legislation above the minimum. Such issues as the Right to Work, reapportionment and other emotional proposal will help stir the political fervor.