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Legislative limelights . . .

House chair changes jar seniority system

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House Speaker Ralph Omstead's dramatic action of deposing of three committee chairmen who opposed his re-election in favor of those who supported him raised fears among many that it threatens the Idaho Legislature seniority system.

Many if not most of the Republican lawmakers believe the shifts may have been justified on grounds the performances of those unseated were less than satisfactory.

Olmstead, who appears a rather quiet individual but who can take firm action, bucked the seniority system by naming Rep. Kitty Gurnsey, R-Boise, to replace Rep. Ray E. Infanger, as chairman of the Appropriations Committee; Rep. John Brooks, R-Gooding, to succeed Rep. Carroll Dean, R-Nampa, as chairman of the Agricultural Affairs Committee; and Rep. James Golder, R-Boise, to replace Rep. Ken Stephenson, R-Nampa, as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee.

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The ousted chairmen in all cases were backers of Rep. Dan Emery, R-Boise, who unsuccessfully challenged Omstead for the leadership. The conservatives and moderates joined hands to give Omstead an easy 2-1 victory over Emery, a member of the far right faction.

The action indicates Omstead used his vast powers to punish those opposing him, although there were factors of performances. It's the first time such a wholesale junking of committee chairmen as taken place as long as can be remembered, although there have been some isolated chairman changes in the past.

Rep. Wayne E. Tibbitts, R-Lorenzo, a backer of Omstead, expressed concern over the ouster of Infanger, who is also a state representative of District 20, made up of Jefferson, Lemhi, Clark and Custer counties.

Tibbitts formally asked Rep. Bud Lewis, R-St. Maries, chairman of the Republican Caucus Committee, to call a caucus meeting to air the matter but Lewis refused on grounds nothing could be gained.

Tibbitts said on the House floor "I am not proud

of some of the things that had happened in the organizational session. I had asked for a caucus and had been denied . . . the credibility of a legislator from my district (Infanger) has been attacked and I wanted a meeting of the caucus."

Tibbitts told this writer he wanted to represent the views of his constituents by formally entering a protest on the House floor. The ploy likely cost Tibbitts the support of Omstead, Lewis, and the leadership. Previous to this, as an Omstead backer, he was in line for a committee chairmanship due to his seniority but he said he was not interested.

Tibbitts said he was further incensed because Infanger was not only deposed as chairman but was even placed behind Rep. Mack Neibaur, R-Paul, who was elevated to the committee vice chairman.

"I think this was an affront to the people in District 20," said Tibbitts.

It's ironical that Tibbitts should come to Infanger's defense because Tibbitts was a similar victim in 1978 when he backed Rep. Walter E. Little for speaker against Omstead. The result was his loss of chairmanship of the House Ways and Means Committee, which is actually an empty title since the committee is subservient to the will of the speaker and a burial grounds for bills.

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Infanger had hoped to serve as chairman but he took his defeat in good graces, insisting legislators have no right to let their misunderstandings interfere with the operation of state government.

Dean and Stephenson, however, expressed bitterness, as did Little, a strong advocate of the seniority system. Little was re-elected House majority leader over Rep. Jack Kennevick, former assistant majority leader, by two votes, although Kennevick had Omstead's open backing.

Infanger will continue to serve on the Appropriation Committee and Stephenson will remain on the Means and Ways Committee but Dean asked to be shifted from the Agriculture Committee to Health and Welfare.

The reorganization session got off to a rocky start but whether this bodes ill for the regular session to start next month remains to be seen.