Idaho legislative leaders reactionaries

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By BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register columnist

The greatness of a Legislature is often determined by its leaders, and the present ones have proved themselves reactionaries.

Tom Stivers

The House is led by Speaker Tom Stivers, R-Twin Falls, who has woefully failed in directing the lower chamber to enact progressive legislation. In fact, he can be considered one of the weak est and least respected speakers in many years.

The Senate is headed by Senate President Pro Tem James Risch, R-Boise, an astute lawyer but one who has shown disinclination to plow out new legislative ground. His main policy is to hold the line, although he is capable of better performance.

Stivers replaced his fellow townsman Ralph Olmstead who gave up the job in his unsuccessful quest for the governorship in 1982. He lost the Republican primary to Lt. Gov. Philip Batt, who eventually lost to Democrat Gov. John V. Evans.

Olmstead was considered a solid member of the conservative wing, but surprisingly turned out to be a progressive leader. After his election to the speakership in a close race with State Rep. Steve Antone, R-Rupert, he proved to be a fair and capable leader. He will go down as one of the better ones in accomplishments during the past decade.

Olmstead replaced Rep. Allan F. Larsen, R-Blackfoot, who also gave up his position in 1978 after four sessions, for his doomed efforts for the governorship. He did win the Republican nomination in a mild surprise but was defeated handily by Evans in the general election.

Before him there were such capable speakers as Pete T. Cenarrusa, Carey rancher, who served in 1963-67, and has since became secretary of state. Then there was one of the best ones, W. D. Eberle, Boise, who presided over the lower chamber in 1961-63, and the last Democrat, Robert Doolittle, Bonners Ferry, 1959-60.

The Senate experienced some bleak times when Reed Budge, R-Soda Springs, served as president pro tem 1979-82. He proved so recalcitrant and uncooperative that he made many enemies. In the 1983 session, a majority desposed him from power, the first time this is believed to have happened in the Senate in recent years.

The successful ouster movement was mounted by Sen. William Floyd, R-Idaho Falls, but he was joined by a majority of his Senate Republican colleagues. It resulted in Risch elevated from majority leader to pro tem.

Before Risch were several capable Senate leaders. They included Batt, the Wilder onion grower, 1977-78; James Ellsworth, Leadore rancher, 1969-76; R. H. Young Jr., Caldwell, 1963-66; Jack M. Murphy, Shoshone, who later became lieutenant governor, 1963-65; A. W. Naegle, Idaho Falls realtor, 1961-62; and the last Democrat, J. J. "Jack" Buxton, Driggs, 1957-60.

In recent years, the Legislature has beome increasingly conservative to reflect the mood of the times.

The 1985 session was generally viewed as below average. The Legislature refused to substantially increase funding for education and state government. It was dead set against any new general taxation, following apparently the dictum of the average taxpayer. It appropriated $5 million more than was available in revenue. This helped spark the gubernatorial 2.5 percent holdback of $14.7 million in state government spending in the present fiscal year in view of an anticipated $11 million shortfall.

The 1984 session did a little better in temporarily increasing the sales tax 1½ cents to more adequately fund education which was then in dire straits and still is for that matter.

Statememts from Risch and Stivers indicate there will be no startling legislation enacted in the 1986 session, certainly not any new general taxes. This includes the latest bipartisan tax increase proposal by Reps. Larry EchoHawk and Ed Brown, both of Pocatello; Don Loveland, Boise, and Tim Tucker, Porthill.

The session promises to be about as exciting as peeling a banana. The leadership and even the governor take a dim view of affixing any new taxes because of the sluggish Idaho economy. The fact 1986 is a general election year is another factor against raising taxes, to avoid enmity of taxpayers.

There's an old practice in the House of often enacting popular but bad laws, leaving it to the Senate to kill them. The Senate usually does, but that brings no great reflection to the lower chamber. Some of the House-passed laws killed by the Senate would be a disaster to the state and a few do get by.

While Risch had firm control of his Republican senators, this is not true of Stivers. Stivers was on the losing end on such major issues as trying to cut education increases and opposing the Swan Falls hydroelectric agreement. These were enacted over his vociferous objections.

He also is quick to shoot from the hip, often sharply criticizing legislation that doesn't meet his approval. For example, it was Stivers who said bluntly that state public employees should be reduced a straight 10 percent, an idea which was noticeably ignored by his fellow legislators.

In another example, Rep. Linden B. Bateman, R-Idaho Falls, in House leadership as majority caucus chairman, had to split with Stivers on education funding increase in the last session.

If Stivers persists in his obstructionist ways, it is highly probable that he will follow the path of Budge and be desposed of by his colleagues in the 1987 session if he is still around.

Stivers barely won the speakership over Antone three years ago and again this year by a couple of votes. It wouldn't take much to oust him in the 1987-88 biennium if he continues his negative maneuvers.