

Legislative limelights

Individual legislators star in 45th session

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Although the overall performance of the second regular session of the 45th Idaho Legislature was likely one of the poorest in recent years, there were a number of lawmakers who won the plaudits of their colleagues and political observers.

This is indicated by a consensus survey of a number of the veteran newsmen, attaches, lobbyists and the legislators themselves.

In recent past years, Sens. Richard High, R-Twin Falls, and Philip E. Batt, R-Wilder, were generally rated among the top but conditions have changed.

High surrendered chairmanship of the Joint Finance Appropriation Committee after he was beaten for Senate president pro tem by Sen. Reed Budge at the start of the 1979 session. He then took chairmanship of the Senate Judiciary and Rules Committee, which hardly makes much impact. High's surprisingly strong opposition to increasing the loaning authority of the Idaho Housing Agency to help those badly in need of home mortgage loans was a mystery, and not in keeping with his character.

Batt, of course, became lieutenant governor, handling the rather mundane, chore of presiding over the Senate. The jealous Republican leadership isolated him because he is a prime gubernatorial contender. A member of the leadership, House Speaker Ralph Olmstead a rigid conservative, has the same ambition and naturally deprived Batt, viewed as a moderate, of as much voice as possible.

The entire leadership in both chambers and both sides of the aisle is hardly to be commended.

Majority Leader Walter E. Little, R-Plymouth, and Assistant Majority Leader Jack Kennevick, R-Boise, did seek compromises and sought to be fair.

The entire Democratic leadership can hardly be faulted, as it was in no position to set policies. Most of them had a responsibility to act their minority role and this they did well. Neither House Minority Leader Patricia McDermott, D-Pocatello, or Senate Minority Leader Cy C. Chase, R-St. Maries, particularly starred.

Perhaps the one who did unusually well, and who may become one of the influential leaders of the future was Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, Senate minority caucus chairman, who often became his party's spokesman.

With Chase foregoing re-election, it would appear that Merrill could take the top spot of his party. Others mentioned for leadership role are Sens. Ron Twilegar, D-Boise, former minority leader, Assistant Minority Leader, Kermit Kiebert (pronounced Keybur), D-Hope, and possibly the veteran Mike Mitchell, D-Lewiston, if he is interested. If the Democrats win control of the Senate, as is possible, all four could advance to majority leadership.

Many Republican senators privately suggest the Senate President Pro Tem Budge be replaced, and among those mentioned, now that High also doesn't plan to return, are Sens. Leon Swenson, R-Nampa; David Little, R-Emmett, and perhaps other members of the present leadership, such as Majority Leader James Risch, R-Boise; and Assistant Majority Leader J. Wilson Steen, R-Glenns Ferry.

All these speculations, of course, are based on the premise all will be re-elected, and this is by now means a certainty in some cases.

In the Senate and considered by most to have turned in impressive performances despite the mediocre leadership were Sens. John M. Barker, R-Buhl, who spearheaded important education bills; Richard A. Egbert, dean of the Legislature, who as ranking member of the JFAP, fought and won many

appropriation battles for essential program; and Reese Verner, R-Nampa, who often crossed party lines to vote for what he thought were progressive bills. His vote opposing his own leadership for premature adjournment won him the admiration of many of his colleagues.

Over in the House, most impartial observers considered the overall record excellent of such legislators as Reps. Steve Antone, R-Rupert, the astute chairman of the House Revenue and Taxation Committee; J. Vard Chatburn, R-Albion, highly esteemed chairman of the House Resources and Conservation Committee; J. Michael Gwartney, R-Boise, who led in efforts on much progressive legislation, including seeking to equitably implement the 1 percent initiative; and Lawrence Knigge, R-Filer, a moderate voice on appropriation.

From East Idaho who won respect were Reps. Elaine Kearnes, R-Idaho Falls, hard-working chairman of the House Health and Welfare Committee, who fought for needed human services programs; Linden B. Bateman, R-Idaho Falls, whose oratorical approach helped on water, education and other matters; John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, chairman of the House Transportation Committee, who fought for highway funding which was turned down in the Senate as a victim of political byplay but who also was a strong education voice.

Others include Darwin L. Young, R-Blackfoot, a powerful voice in implementing the 1 percent and in tax appraisal matters and who also successfully sponsored the IHA bill in the lower chamber; Wendell Miller, D-Idaho, a successful nuclear champion but who also had strong input on educational, transportation and health matters; and Doyle C. Miner, the hardworking JFAC co-chairman. He is the only East Idaho lawmaker who has announced he does not plan to seek re-election.