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F-2

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Legislative limelights...

House leadership tilts hint factional splits

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The bitter leadership fights in the Idaho House of Representatives at the reorganization session a week ago confirms creation of a deep factional split among the lawmakers of the lower chamber.

It's ironic that House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, previously viewed as a hard conservative, has now moved towards the center as result of the uncompromising far right wing's opposition.

Also other winners in the House Republican leadership are from the conservative and moderate ranks, which indicates the 46th session, to convene Jan. 12, will not be as radical right as many feared previously.

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Olmstead defeated the far right challenger, Rep. Dan Emery, R-Boise, by a topheavy margin of something like 39-17 for the speakership. This indicates that Olmstead drew the support of the moderates and conservatives who likely will dominate the session.

The only other philosophical battle was for assistant majority leader and Rep. Darwin Young, R-Blackfoot, viewed somewhat as a moderate, trounced one of the most vocal radical rightists, Rep. Gene Winchester, R-Kuna, by about the same 2-1 margin as in the speakership contest.

The other contests lacked this factional division and were more along party and personal popularity lines, with House Majority Leader Walter E. Little, New Plymouth, a conservative, nosing out a liberal, former assistant majority leader, Jack Kenneville, R-Boise, by two votes; and Caucus Chairman Bud Lewis, R-St. Maries, whacking Rep. Dan Kelly, R-Mountain Home, by a 2-1 margin. Both are considered conservatives, Lewis more so than Kelly.

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The small but tight band of 14 Democrats also furnished some fireworks as the conservative, Rep. Melvin Hammond, Rexburg, ousted Minority House Leader Patricia McDermott, Pocatello, two votes, reversing the results of 1974. Rep. Lou Horvath, D-Pinehurst, was unopposed for assistant minority leader while Caucus Chairman

Marion Davidson, D-Bonnars Ferry, turned back the challenge of Rep. Harold Reid, D-Craigmont, a former assistant minority leader, in a close vote.

Olmstead wielded an iron fist in ousting three House committee chairman, Reps. Ray E. Infanger, Salmon; Carroll Dean, Notus; and Kenneth Stephenson, Nampa, after they refused to support him. In Infanger's case, particularly, Olmstead had full right as he had appointed Infanger temporarily as chairman last summer to fill a vacancy created by the resignation of Rep. Doyle C. Miner, R-St. Anthony. He undoubtedly felt justified in reversing the action for the new session when Infanger deserted him.

Olmstead and many lawmakers felt that neither Dean nor Stephenson had performed well as chairman and the same question was raised about Infanger but he never got the chance to preside except at a couple of informal sessions late this year.

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The lineup on some emotional and appropriation issues now indicate the radical right of some 17-20 members is isolated and in the abject minority.

From East Idaho, of the 12 House members, only Infanger and Rep. Martin Trillhase, R-Idaho Falls, can be viewed on the far right. Rep. Wayne E. Tibbitts, R-Lorenzo, considers himself an independent but sometimes joins the right wing on some issues. He supported Olmstead for speaker but then criticized him and Lewis for deposing Infanger, and even not giving him the vice chairmanship of the House Appropriation Committee.

The Democrats, of course, will find no difficulty to join the moderate-conservative groups on most legislative issues.

The election of Hammond, as a conservative, will make it easier for the Democrats to deal with the Republican, rather than Miss McDermott, considered one of the most liberal legislators under the marble dome of the State Capitol.

This indicates the House may follow a middle-of-road conservative line, but certainly not the radical right. That should benefit Idaho.