

Two East Idaho Democrats seek leadership

BY BEN J. PLASTINO

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Only two Democratic legislators remain in the six legislative districts covering 10 East Idaho counties but both seek the top minority leadership positions for the upcoming 1981 Idaho Legislature.

They are State Sen. Israel Merrill, Blackfoot, who manages the Trading Post at Fort Hall, and State Rep. Melvin Hammond, Ricks College religious instructor. Hammond was unopposed for re-election as has been the case in recent years while Merrill turned back the bid of Republican Blackfoot businessman Dean Jones by nearly 1,000 votes in the Nov. 4 general election.

In fact, Merrill was the only Democrat legislative candidate to win an election in East Idaho.

Both Merrill and Hammond participated in the North Idaho legislative tour last weekend sponsored by North Idaho business firms but no firm decision was reached on the minority leadership, and in some cases, some spots on majority leadership.

Merrill said he will strive for Senate minority leader to

replace Sen. Cy C. Chase, St. Maries, who did not seek re-election; while Hammond said he will enter a bid to become House minority leader to oust Rep. Patricia McDermott, Pocatello, who again wants the position.

Merrill said that Sens. Ron Twiligar, Boise, and Mike Mitchell, Lewiston, were seeking to persuade each other to take the minority post.

Merrill said in view of this reluctance on the part of each he notified his fellow Democrats that he would seek the position, adding that he felt he could work well with Gov. John V. Evans.

Merrill said his entry now leaves the minority leadership in a state of flux. If he should win, there would then be a decision on whether Twilegar, Mitchell and Sen. Kermit Kiebert, Hope, the present assistant leader, would take other minority leadership spots. This would need to be settled at the Legislative reorganization session Dec. 3-5.

"I feel a minority leader should really want the job and work closely with the governor," Merrill said. "Neither Twilegar nor Mitchell have shown this."

"Furthermore I believe I

could work well with the majority party. I think we must have a strong leadership which must have the caucus behind them. I don't think we should have the friction we had last year."

Merrill referred to the considerable bickering between Chase and the Republican leadership.

Merrill said if he should lose in the leadership role, then he would seek a spot on the powerful Senate Finance Committee. He said that if Mitchell went into leadership, he would have to give up a place on the finance committee.

Merrill is presently in leadership as the Senate Democrat caucus chairman, the only East

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Idahoan in leadership role.

Merrill said he believes he has support from most of the South Idaho Democratic senators. He needs seven votes for victory.

Merrill served six years in the House and four years in the Senate, the last two as the Democratic caucus chairman. He is also a member of the State Affairs; Health, Education and Welfare, and the Commerce and Labor committees.

Hammond favors a tougher task to oust Mrs. McDermott but he said he believes he has a chance. The defeat of Rep. Wendell Miller, D-Idaho Falls, deprived him of the key vote he felt he needed.

Hammond said he has support from many of the present South Democrat state representatives but needs to win at least one of the four freshmen from North Idaho.

Hammond has served six terms, or 12 years in the House,

and served as assistant minority leader in the 1971-72 sessions and minority leader in 1973-74. He was beaten for re-election by Miss McDermott in the 1975 session.

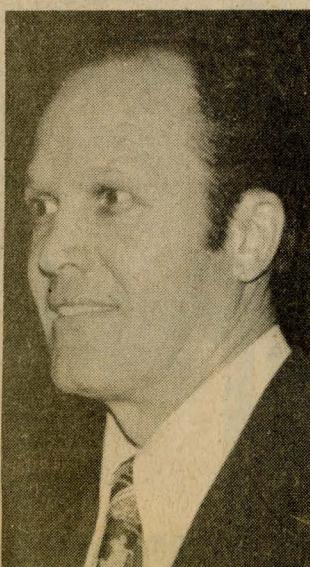
Hammond said he is viewed as a staunch conservative and believes his philosophical outlook would work much better with the conservative Republicans than can Miss McDermott, viewed by her colleagues as one of the most liberal in the lower house.

Hammond noted that Rep. Harold Reid, Craigmont, seeks to become caucus chairman, opposing the present caucus chairman, Marion Davidson, Bonners Ferry; while Rep. Lou Horvath, Pinehurst, is eying the assistant minority post to replace Ron Harlow, Lewiston, who did not run for re-election.

Hammond is a member of the House State Affairs and Business committees.



Sen. Israel Merrill,
D-Blackfoot



Rep. Melvin Hammond,
D-Rexburg