

Deep GOP Partisanship beat Robert Lenaghan

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Defeat of crusty Robert Lenaghan's confirmation as president of the Idaho Public Utility Commission brings many ramifications and substantiates predictions that the Idaho Senate this year will somewhat resemble a three-ringed circus.

The 19 Republicans cast a solid vote against confirmation, while the Democrats voted a unanimous 16 ballots in favor, confirming the struggle was strictly partisan, highly emotional, and not based on merits.

Some two or three weeks ago it appeared that Lenaghan had enough votes for confirmation, then something happened in the final days leading to the confirmation battle last week. It appears the public utilities, led by Boise lobbyist, Vernon F. Ravenscroft, thrice general election loser, twisted enough arms among the moderate Republican senators for the victory.

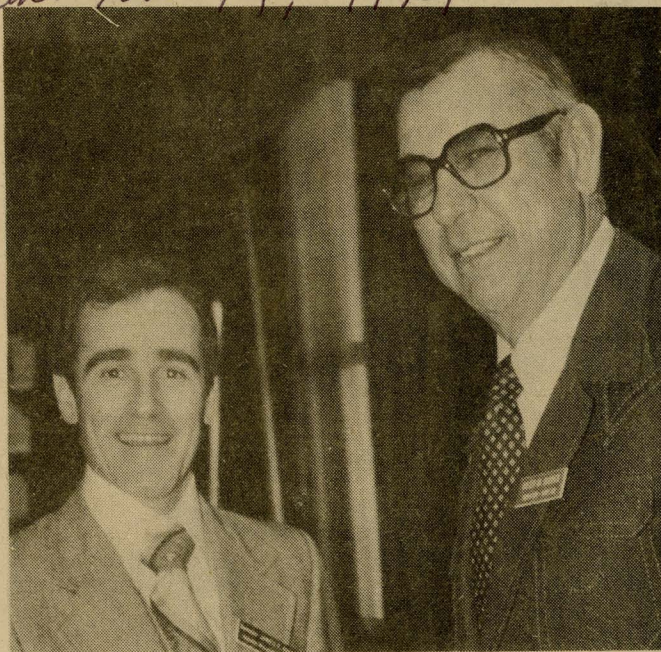
Debate in the Senate State Affairs Committee, then later on the Senate floor, never once questioned Lenaghan's qualifications and abilities. It is apparent they felt his dominant personality had swerved the IPUC strongly for the consumers, the common people.

Republican senators charged Lenaghan was a consumer advocate, which in itself is a glowing compliment. Before Lenaghan and a Democratic backer, Conley Ward, and before him, Karl Shurtliff, were appointed, the IPUC was considered little more than a window of the public utilities.

Throughout the hearings, however, Mountain Bell Telephone Co., stood out as a twinkling beacon in endorsing the confirmation.

The charges against Lenaghan were mostly a matter of nitpicking, that he used his blunt-speaking ways in seeking to upgrade the IPUC, and even — horrors — encouraged lobbying to get higher salaries and needed personnel. There isn't one single state agency that hasn't done this. Lenaghan appears more honest about it.

The attack against Lenaghan was led by two Republican leaders who are considered by colleagues as strong public utility backers, Senate President Pro Tem Reed Budge, Soda Springs, and Majority Leader James Risch, Boise.



Post-Register photo

Licked Lenaghan

BOISE — These two Senate Republican leaders led the successful attack against reconfirmation of plain-speaking Robert Lenaghan as president of the Idaho Public Utility Commission. James Risch, left, Boise, majority leader, and Reed Budge, president pro tem, saw Lenaghan beaten 16-19 on a straight party line vote last Friday.

Public records of the Federal Power Commission showed Risch, an attorney, has worked for Idaho Power Co., receiving \$10,730 in legal fees in 1977 and \$6,854 in 1976. This should have led to his disqualification in voting yet he defiantly led the onslaught.

The loss of Philip E. Batt, the fair-minded and knowledgeable Senate president pro tem of the last two sessions, was sorely felt. Batt is now the lieutenant governor. From 30 years observation the Senate leadership this year appears one of the most politically oriented in history.

The vote was one against the consumers — bulk of the Idaho people — and in favor of the vested interests. It places the Senate Republicans in the unenviable position of backers for the big corporation, not the citizens at large.

Particularly disturbing, however, is how East Idaho Republican senators can justify their vote against Lenaghan when East Idahoans fought so stringently against the Utah Power and Light Co.'s request for an exorbitant 52 percent power rate increase and 90 percent hike for irrigators. It was Lenaghan who led the movement last fall that brought PUC approval of a modest 13.7 percent increase.

At the 1978 general election, this Lenaghan issue greatly helped Democrat Gov. John V. Evans win the City of Idaho Falls, Lemhi, Clark, Custer and Butte counties, and narrowed the margins dramatically in the other East Idaho counties against Republican challenger Allen Larsen, who had said he would fire Lenaghan.

Republican Sens. J. Marsden Williams and Dane Watkins, Idaho Falls; Mark G. Ricks, Rexburg, and Vearyl Crystal, Rigby, obviously did not represent their constituents when they voted against confir-

mation. They thus now place themselves in a vulnerable position for 1980.

Evans, of course, will appoint a commission member who will continue to support the people.

There are many names tossed in the rumor hopper, but one who may receive more than passing consideration is Stan Kress, former Firth School superintendent, who twice lost the Second District Congress contests to Republican U. S. Rep George Hansen.

Kress, who resigned the Firth superintendency last year for the campaign is now negotiating to take over ownership of the Rockford Lumber, Hardware, Furniture, and Cafe Builders, west of Blackfoot but the deal hasn't been completed and likely won't be for several months. This means he is available, if interested, and he might be.

Evans, of course, hasn't considered a replacement, but he said he won't appoint one until after the legislative session adjourns in March, so that the new IPUC member will have served a year by the time the Senate gets around to confirmation.

Irene Beard, Rigby, who was the Democratic nominee but lost for state representative in District 20, noted that her name has been mentioned as a possible successor. She said she was an avid backer of Lenaghan and had never campaigned for the position but now that he has been ousted she would consider an appointment if people and the governor wanted her.