

Capitol Report

Senator Luann Ridgeway

April 6, 2007

Halfway Point

The Missouri State Senate has now entered the last 6 weeks of the 2007 Legislative Session. As the first half of Session was marked by contention and late night filibusters, so started the second half as well. The Senate was in session until 4:00 am one night as the repeal of riverboat gambling loss limits was debated. Tied to the legislation were measures increasing the tax on casino revenue and providing scholarships for Missouri college students. Opposition to the bill centered mainly on the removal of loss limits. Debate revealed that Missouri is the only place in the world enforcing loss limits. The bill was eventually set aside when it became apparent the filibuster would continue indefinitely.

Long days marked the entire week. Due to my work on the Senate Appropriations Committee, I was not able to leave work until 10:00 p.m. on Monday. We resumed Appropriations hearings on Tuesday at 8:00 a.m. followed by session of the full Senate at 10:00 a.m. We stayed in session all day and all night, concluding at 4:00 a.m. on Wednesday. The full Senate again resumed work at 10:00 a.m. on Wednesday and stayed in session until 11:00 p.m. We were back at work at 10:00 a.m. on Thursday. I finally got back home about 6:00 p.m.

Political observers agree term limits have changed the dynamics of the Senate. With a four-year term, a senator could reasonably expect to be in the Senate for twelve, sixteen, or even twenty years. A handful stayed even longer. As a result, patience was a virtue often rewarded. A legislator could spend years building coalitions and support for an issue or philosophy. They knew if they didn't work together, they would quickly be isolated from any future negotiations, so members worked together to find solutions a majority could live with. They knew the person working against them may still be there ten years from now. While the final compromise may not be everything they wanted, it was still a means to an end.

This Senate membership is the first where every legislator was elected under term limits. No one will serve more than eight years. As a result, the virtue of patience no longer exists -- nor does the thought they may be working with someone for a decade or more. Starting in 2010, at least a few senators will be pushed out by term limits every two years. This has led to a greater sense of urgency to pass a bill or keep a bill blocked. Senators also know someone they may be at odds with on an issue will only be able to stand for reelection one time. This takes away the mandate for coalitions and compromise.

Is this good or bad for the process? Honestly, I am not sure, but it has changed the rules for decorum and debate. Rather than negotiate for a reasonable compromise, the minority party can use the filibuster to indefinitely block a vote. By the same token, the majority party can use a procedural move known the “previous question” to end debate and force a vote. By tradition, this procedural maneuver was rarely used because a senator knew it might be used against them on a future issue, maybe years down the road. Now, this concern is outweighed by the knowledge they only have a limited number of sessions to accomplish their objectives. The traditions of the Senate are undergoing a change and we have a front row seat to a civics lesson.

My husband and I will be celebrating our 23rd wedding anniversary this Saturday! I hope all of you enjoy a blessed Easter Celebration on Sunday.

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