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Passing Legislation while Preserving Senate Tradition

JEFFERSON CITY — The last few days have seen a dramatic slowdown in the Missouri Senate as a group of senators employed the use of a tactic called the filibuster. A filibuster is a procedural technique that extends the debate on an issue and in some cases even prevents a bill from ever being voted on. Filibusters can go on for hours, even continuing through the night as each side seeks to break the other's resolve to continue.

The issue that sparked the current situation was the failure of the minority party to change the rules of the Senate to require the consent of at least 60 percent of the members to cut off a filibuster (under current rules, a simple majority is required). As it was designed to do, the use of the filibuster in this instance has led to a compromise between the parties. The agreement calls for representatives of both parties to study the issue and to try to find a way that this powerful tool can be employed in a way that is productive for all involved.

The filibuster is a time-honored tradition. I have used it on occasion when I felt that an issue was being pushed through the Senate that needed to be stopped or at least needed more scrutiny. This procedure allows a minority viewpoint to be brought to the forefront when otherwise it might be lost in the majority's haste to pass legislation.

The counterbalance to this tactic is the previous question motion, or PQ. This tool is used to immediately cut off debate and require the Senate to vote on the matter at hand.

The Missouri Senate is unique in large part because of the ability of the minority to delay a vote through use of the filibuster in order to bring the majority to the negotiating table. However, there is a direct correlation between the use of the filibuster and the need for the majority party to invoke the PQ motion.

Historically, PQ motions were extremely rare in the Senate. Years ago when people served in the Senate for many years, relationships were formed despite disagreement on the issues. Senators understood that to pass legislation, they would need to work together and compromise to get anything accomplished. In those days, the minority resisted until they had extracted all the concessions they could. Just before the majority reached the breaking point,

the minority would yield the floor and allow a vote. The PQ was almost never necessary because of the “give and take” between the parties. Unfortunately, this accommodation has waned in recent years.

The Senate is about a group of people with varied backgrounds and perspectives entrusted to come together to do what is best for the people of Missouri. It is important that we figure out a way to move forward on important legislation. I believe with the agreement reached this week between the parties to try to find an agreeable solution that we’re making steps in the right direction.

If you have any comments or questions about this week’s column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.mo.gov or by phone at (888) 711-9278. My web address is <http://www.senate.mo.gov/bartle>.