

# House speaker holds reform power

By JANE LEHMAN  
Of the Emerald

The first place to begin legislative reform is with the powers of the House speaker, state Rep. Grattan Kerans, D-Eugene, told the local chapter of Common Cause Monday night.

Kerans joined Alan Green, director of legislative research, in isolating potential areas the public interest group might support as issues. Common Cause is now planning legislation to submit to the 1979 state Legislature.

"The most important vote your state representative makes is for the speaker," Kerans told the audience of 15. "After that he (state representative) can go for five

months without casting a vote that even begins to measure up in significance."

Powers of the House speaker include appointment of all members to each standing committee, withdrawal of memberships, assignment of legislation to committees and subsequent referral of legislation to other committees.

"House rules, custom and tradition" are the only checks on the power of the presiding officer, the representative said.

"Customs and tradition set the boundaries, which will work as long as the speaker has a working majority in the house," Kerans said.

Last spring House Speaker Phil Lang lost that crucial working majority due to abuses of his power,

according to Kerans.

"Too much rural, agricultural, conservative legislation was sent to the graveyard," he said.

As a result, a "revolt" led to the suspension of the speaker's powers, which were turned over to a rules committee, unpopularly referred to as the "gang of six," he said. However, Kerans was not happy with the outcome.

"We went from a very powerful speaker to a figurehead who presided over the meetings. Neither was very satisfactory."

After the session ended, a Task Force on Rules and Procedures was appointed in the fall to review each power of the speaker and procedures for adopting rules. The purpose of this year-long investigation is to "democratize the rules," according to Kerans.

The task force is looking into three areas now controlled by the speaker: appointment of members to committees, selection of committee chairmen and vice-chairmen and control over bill assignment to standing committees.

Kerans predicted that eventu-

ally "both minority and majority caucuses will select their own members and leaders."

He warned against suggestions of dividing up the power of the speaker.

"Put the responsibility in one place. Common Cause should not attempt to diversify power that there is no accountability. If power accumulates in one person there should be a check on that power."

Kerans said the legislature would not return to its former methods of selecting the presiding officers. "During the past session only one vice-chairmanship was granted by the speaker to a minority party."

In past years, the minority party received "11 or 12 or all of the vice-chairmanships. They (minority party) felt cut off from the beginning," said Kerans.

Kerans endorsed the idea of chair selection by a vote of the majority and minority caucuses.

"It's the only route that will ever recognize talent, which is different from use of power. Under the pre-

sent system we are wasting and frustrating good talent in public service."

The problems inherent in speaker control over bill assignment and referral is the lack of adequate checks, the representative said.

Presently, the speaker can assign a bill to a hostile committee, make enough subsequent referrals to kill a bill or arbitrarily hold it on his desk. Kerans has known cases of bills "lost" for 100-day spans under the latter conditions.

"Usually it happened because it was blatantly objectionable or obnoxious to those in the majority party," but this was abused beyond tolerable limits, said Kerans.

Methods to remedy the situation include shortening the time period of referral, spelling out jurisdiction of standing committees, limiting subsequent referrals and allowing appeals on referrals.

In summation, Kerans warned the Common Cause members, "Issues may never survive unless the process allows honest, full-treatment of your issues."

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