

Just health

Health care and the "politics of politics"

"We have frequently printed the word democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawaken'd, notwithstanding the resonance and the many angry tempests out of which its syllables have come, from pen or tongue. It is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted. It is, in some sort, younger brother of another great and often-used word whose history also waits unwritten."
— Walt Whitman

BY STEVEN BAILEY, N.D.

It is ironic that the 1987 legislative session passed HB 2001, a South African divestiture bill. I say this because, while divestiture has been an issue for many sessions, this has certainly not been the legislative body that epitomizes empathy to self-determination, employment and human rights issues. This body has, to a great extent, acted in a manner that leans much more heavily towards the interests of business and insurance companies as opposed to those of the workers, labor and social services.

The 1987 Oregon Legislative session was conducted at an incredible pace while struggling with the most co-equal makeup (Republicans to Democrats) in recent history. This parity has resulted in a body that acted much more conservatively than Governor Goldschmidt probably wished. It has also resulted in a body that underscored the power of the lobby, the politics of compromise and ultimately the politics of politics.

This article will attempt to appraise particular actions as well as general tendencies of our legislators in the areas of health care, workers comp/labor issues. My next article will combine a number of Oregon's public interest groups' evaluations into an overall evaluation of our 1987 legislators.

Before I begin on content of legislation, a short overview. Legislation in the above mentioned areas is reviewed and acted on either by the House or Senate Committees on Labor or Human Resources. On the senate side these committees are chaired by Sen. Larry Hill and Sen. Bill McCoy respectively. Their House counterparts are Reps. Bob Shiprack and Rick Kotulski. Each committee has a Democratic majority of one and bills must be passed out of committee by a majority vote.

Workers Comp: Reform and improvement of workers comp statutes are defined quite differently from one house to the other. House Bill (HB) 2103, which came out of Rep. Shiprack's labor committee after three tries, placed substantial responsibility on the injured worker, including legal fees, and was seen by labor, legal groups and workers to be a very poor bill. This bill was essentially a dream list of the insurance industry, the Oregon Medical Association and big business. This is not too surprising considering Shiprack's and Kotulski's strong friendships with these groups. What resulted was a bill that ended up far removed from the changes suggested by Governor Goldschmidt.

HB 2103 was passed by the whole House but has died on the Senate side. The Senate counterpart, HB 2900, purports a much more balanced set of changes. This bill will help eliminate abuse within workers comp, but leaves in checks and balances essential to a fair and equitable disability

program. At a time when we need to improve Oregon's attractiveness to new industry, it is reassuring to see the stance that Sen. Hill's committee has taken. The final concurrence on these issues has yet to take place, but hopefully will take the form of HB 2900.

The Senate Human Resources Committee conducted business in a manner I consider to have been fair, objective and productive. While I agree with Willamette Week's evaluation of Sen. Roberts as having an excellent session, I must differ with their appraisal of Sen. McCoy. I found Sen. McCoy to be one of the least impressive legislators as related to self interest lobbies and his chairing of Human Resources to be excellent, at a time when Salem's self-interests strongly influenced policy.

On the House side the Human Resources Committee again reflected the presence of Chair Rick Kotulski and member Bob Shiprack. While this committee at times appeared to be meeting at the desire of the Oregon Medical Association and the insurance industry, we must acknowledge the excellent representation given by members Margaret Carter and Mary Alice Ford.

Human Resources: While this encompasses a wide range of issues, the action of the House can be paralleled to its action on HB 2650 and SB 292. I cite these bills because I followed them very closely throughout the session.

SB 292: This was a bill that was introduced by one of the "alternative medical" associations. While the OMA and the Oregon Osteopathic Association testified against this bill, as they do against nearly all bills introduced by other members of the Healing Arts, the Senate passed the bill by a vote of 23-4. It was assigned to Rep. Kotulski's committee where he said he would hear it after higher priorities were taken care of. As the session neared completion he decided he wouldn't give it a hearing because it was "too controversial." While a majority of his committee favored giving this bill a hearing, Chair Kotulski let it die.

The House actions on HB 2650 further exemplify the influence of the big dollar lobby. This was a bill that brought Oregon's insurance codes into agreement with the majority of states regarding non-discrimination in choice and re-imbursment of health care provider. While this bill paralleled a plank of the Democratic Party and had numerous public interest groups' support (and even had Kotulski as a signed sponsor), Rep. Kotulski led the republican-based floor opposition to this bill. Very few people spoke against this bill

during its hearings, but as it approached the floor a coalition of lobbyists fought its passage. The lobbyists represented many insurance carriers (especially companies like Blue Cross which is owned by M.D.'s and has a very real monetary incentive in maintaining discrimination that favors M.D.'s and D.D.'s), the O.M.A., the Portland Chamber of Commerce, Associated Oregon Industries, the Oregon Automobile Dealers Association and the Oregon Education Association. Their combined work really revealed the "politics of politics."

By this I mean the trading of votes on unrelated matters. For example, one representative might be convinced to vote no in exchange for another representative's specific vote on another issue. As a result,

by the time of the floor vote, what had once been assured passage became a 32-28 defeat. The string of broken promises sits heavily in the hearts of those who worked so hard on this important bill.

The appointments by Speaker Katz of Shiprack and Kotulski to their respective chairs was indeed a compromise solution that resulted in a very frustrating session. Let us hope that in the upcoming elections we remember the true nature of our elected officials. Only by actively involving ourselves in the election process can we return to a more objective and productive legislature. My future article and overall evaluation of our legislators may better help you appraise the candidates in the next election. I hope that we find some fresh, objective energy in Salem next session.

ENCORE FLOWERS

PLANTS - FLOWERS - GIFTS

"When the occasion matters...
call Encore."

Call 287-6342

Delivery Anywhere
Visa & Mastercard Accepted

4120 N.E. Sandy Boulevard - Next to the Hollywood Theater



NEW ADS DAILY



\$2.94 PER CALL

The Gay/Lesbian Dating Line

Telephone Recorded Personal Ads
1-976-GAYS(4297) CALL 24 HRS.