



**NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH INC.**

NEWS RELEASE

For release on Monday, Jan. 31, 1994.
May be broadcast Monday A.M. and may
appear in Monday A.M. and P.M. papers

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**Center Examines Evolution of Office of N.C. House Speaker, Finds
Increase in Power**

Institutional changes and political developments have combined to increase the clout of the Office of Speaker of the N.C. House, leaving the post more powerful than it has been in recent history, the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research reports in the latest edition of its journal, North Carolina Insight. And increasingly, the Center says, modern speakers are willing to use their powers to pursue their own agendas, rather than those of the sitting governor.

"That means the governor is going to have to deal with a powerful speaker as he pushes his agenda on crime in the legislative session next week," says Mike McLaughlin, Insight's editor. "The current speaker seems more interested in preventive measures than in the 'lock-'em-up-and-throw-away-the-key' kinds of cures. It will be interesting to see how all this plays out over the course of the special session that begins Feb. 8."

The article by Paul T. O'Connor, a columnist for the Capitol Press Association, examines the Speaker's Office through an exhaustive review of the formal and informal powers of the office, plus interviews with former House speakers, other elected officials, and political observers. Its conclusion? Overall, the Speaker's Office, occupied by Rep. Daniel T. Blue Jr. (D-Wake), is more powerful than it has been over the past three decades, despite a few developments that have weakened the speaker's grip on power.

Factors Increasing the Power of the Speaker of the N.C. House

Among the factors tending to increase the powers of the speaker are:

-- Staff and budget increases for the Speaker's Office: The speaker now has six staff members and an annual budget of approximately \$525,000, although two of these staff members are carried on the books of the Legislative Services Commission. The legislature as a whole has 148 staff members.

-- The development of the legislature's specialized research staff enables the speaker to pursue an independent agenda rather than that of the governor.

-- The break with tradition of one-term speakers in 1979 gave speakers the ability to succeed themselves.

-- Over the last decade, the Speaker's Office has accumulated more than 320 appointments to 120 boards and commissions in the executive branch of state government.

-- The speaker's job has evolved into a full-time position in the push for parity with the Senate and the Lieutenant Governor's Office, leaving the speaker with increased influence.

-- The speaker receives increased media attention due to all of the above.

Political events over the last decade also significantly affected the office. Republican gains beginning in the mid-1980s raised the profile of the Democratic leadership of the General Assembly. With the election of Republican Gov. James G. Martin in 1984 and the re-election of Martin and election of Republican Lt. Gov. James C. Gardner in 1988, the speaker became the highest elected state-level Democrat and, therefore, the principal spokesperson for the opposing party.

These new developments come in addition to the traditional tools of the Speaker's Office that remain in place: the power to preside over the House; the power to control floor debate and interpret House rules; the power to appoint committee chairs and membership; and the power to assign bills to those committees. All of the speaker's powers are derived from House rules or state statutes. The state constitution says only that, "The House of Representatives shall elect its Speaker and other officers."

The new and traditional powers make the Speaker's Office more powerful than it has been in recent history and perhaps enhance the position as a stepping stone to the Office of Governor. Nationally, 21 speakers have run for governor during the past 17 years (1977-1993), according to research by Thad Beyle, a political science professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an authority on governors nationally. Five have been successful, and four of those five have won a second term. The success rate compares favorably with the more traditional launching pads to the Governor's Office -- lieutenant governor and attorney general.* Still, among Southerners, only Tennessee Democrat Ned McWherter has made the direct transition from the Speaker's Office to the governor's mansion.

*(Speakers: 26 races, nine wins, 35 percent success rate; lieutenant governors: 61 races, 17 wins, 28 percent success rate; attorneys general: 53 races, 14 wins, 26 percent success rate.).

The evolution toward more powerful speakers in North Carolina started with Speaker Carl Stewart's decision to break tradition and seek a second term in 1979. Former Speaker Liston Ramsey then held the office for four terms and took further steps to strengthen it.

Ramsey's four terms set a contemporary record for longevity in the Speaker's Office, but he was deposed when 21 disaffected Democrats joined forces with 45 Republicans to elect Rep. Joe Mavretic (D-Edgecombe) to a single term as speaker in 1989. Blue entered the office in 1991 as a peacemaker, knitting together the Democratic factions, and exercised leadership that year in dealing with a \$1.2 billion shortfall in state revenues. But Blue has since raised some eyebrows with his willingness to oppose a sitting governor of his own party, James B. Hunt Jr.

Increased Powers Lead to an Independent Agenda for the Speaker

Blue had at least two high-profile showdowns with the governor during the 1993 session. He buried in a hostile committee legislation Hunt supported calling for a citizen referendum on gubernatorial veto. He sent a bill calling for a referendum on a state lottery to the same committee, although it remained alive for the short session in 1994. Both the veto and lottery bills had passed the Senate.

"Not only does the speaker have more power, he uses it," says McLaughlin. In the 1993 session, for example, Blue supported issues such as raising standards for child care; improving child protective services; strengthening public education; providing increased funding for low-wealth school districts; and reforming the health care system to provide universal coverage for all North Carolina citizens.

Blue also worked to secure \$4.2 million in the state capital budget for a health sciences building at North Carolina Central University in Durham, his undergraduate alma mater, and to set aside \$5 million in case it was needed to secure a London route for Raleigh-Durham International Airport.

Crime and its root causes are among Blue's chief concerns for the future, although past performance suggests he will not be a lockstep promoter of the governor's agenda in the special session on crime. Other issues on Blue's agenda include those affecting children and families, further work in obtaining a universal health plan for North Carolina citizens, economic development efforts, and efforts to promote government efficiency and effectiveness.

According to political observers and elected officials, the fact that Blue has such an overt policy agenda contrasts sharply

with the style of past speakers, who traditionally have supported the agendas of governors of their own parties. "Historically, speakers did not have programs that they supported," says Governor Hunt. "Clearly, we see now that [the speakership] can be a position of affirmative and aggressive leadership."

Reporters who covered the legislature in the 1960s and 1970s agree with Hunt's assessment. "The speaker's agenda was the governor's agenda," says Ted Harrison of the University of North Carolina Center for Public Television, who first came to Raleigh to cover politics in 1968 for WFMY-TV in Greensboro. Russell Clay, who began covering the General Assembly in 1959 and ended his legislative career as a speechwriter for Speaker Liston Ramsey in 1989, offers a similar observation: "They [speakers] were just there to preside." And 13-term Rep. Vernon James (D-Pasquotank) says the same was true during the two terms he served in the 1940s.

Blue doesn't agree with the assessment that speakers historically did not pursue independent agendas. He says former speakers had their own agendas, whether they were vocal about them or not. "If they didn't have an idea [of what they wanted to do in terms of policy], they shouldn't have run for office."

Factors Diminishing the Power of the Speaker of the House

Despite the increase in formal and informal powers, there also have been offsetting factors in the power equation. Among them are:

--Elimination of overt pork barrel appropriations for individual members, which removes a disciplinary tool used by previous speakers. In the 1987 session, for example, senators got \$70,000 each and House members got \$40,000 each. Senators traditionally got the larger share because they represent more people. Groups like rescue squads, rape crisis centers, and arts centers were often the beneficiaries.

--A trend toward more open government gives the speaker less opportunity to twist arms behind closed doors.

--A larger minority party presence in the legislature creates more opportunities for coalitions to defeat the speaker's agenda. Republicans now control 42 of 170 House seats compared to 21 seats in 1963 -- enough to prevent Democratic legislators from automatically mustering the two-thirds majority needed to suspend House rules and pass legislation in a single day.

The speaker also must court Democratic House members more aggressively to prevent any disaffected members from joining Republicans to defeat legislation. "He's more answerable to his

own people, and he has to work harder to see they're satisfied," says Senate Minority Leader Betsy Cochrane (R-Davie). Adds Rep. Harold Brubaker (R-Randolph), who took office in 1977, "When I came, he could let 10 or 15 [Democratic House members] go off on their own. Now he has to work harder to maintain his majority."

And the speaker must pay attention to the demands of everyone from environmentalists to business lobbyists, from health care advocates to medical societies. "A speaker today must consult much more with his members, with a myriad of special interests," says former House Speaker Carl Stewart (1977-1980). "Maybe that's a change for the better."

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit corporation created to study public policy issues facing North Carolina and evaluate state government programs. The Center receives general operating support from the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundations, 120 corporate contributors, and about 870 individual and organizational members.

In addition to publishing North Carolina Insight magazine, the Center has conducted studies on ways to increase voter participation, overcrowding in the state's prison system, and how the University of North Carolina system identifies and rewards excellent teaching. It also publishes Article II, a citizen's guide to the legislature, as well as rankings of the effectiveness of all 170 legislators and rankings of the most influential lobbyists.

Copies of the issue of Insight magazine containing the Center's research on the evolution of the Speaker's Office can be obtained from the Center for \$6.00 plus \$2.50 for tax, shipping, and handling. To order, call (919) 832-2839, or write the N.C. Center, P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, N.C. 27602.

For more information, call Insight Editor Mike McLaughlin at the Center at (919) 832-2839.

The Roots of the Speaker's Power

The Office of the Speaker of the N.C. House of Representatives, unlike that of the Lieutenant Governor, derives none of its powers from the state Constitution. The Constitution says only that, "The House of Representatives shall elect its Speaker and other officers."¹ Instead, most of the speaker's powers are rooted in the easily modified House Rules. State statutes also place the speaker on several boards and commissions and give the speaker authority to make appointments to dozens more. The speaker's powers and their origins are as follows:

A. Powers Derived from State Statutes

1. The power to make outright or to recommend to the General Assembly 323 appointments to 120 boards and commissions in the executive branch. These powers are authorized under N.C.G.S. 120-121 and 120-123 and various other state statutes. (See Tables 4 and 5 for a complete listing of appointments to policy-making and advisory boards controlled by the speaker.)
2. The speaker serves as a member of:
 - The Legislative Research Commission (ex officio), N.C.G.S. 120-30.10(a);
 - The Legislative Services Commission, N.C.G.S. 120-31(a);
 - The Capital Planning Commission, N.C.G.S. 143B-374(a);
 - The Council on Interstate Cooperation, N.C.G.S. 143B-380(2);
 - The Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies (ex-officio), N.C.G.S. 143-533;
 - The Economic Development Board, N.C.G.S. 143B-434, and;
 - Health Planning Commission, N.C.G.S. 143-611.

B. Powers Derived from House Rules

3. The power to preside over the House (1993-94 House Rule 6);
4. The power to control floor debate (1993-94 House Rule 7);
5. The power to decide points of order (1993-94 House Rule 9);
6. The power to vote or reserve the right to vote on legislation before the House (1993-94 House Rule 25);
7. The power to appoint committees and committee chairs (1993-94 House Rule 29);
8. The power to assign bills to committee (1993-94 House Rule 32).

FOOTNOTE

¹ Article II, Sec. 15 of the N.C. Constitution.

Factors Increasing the Power of the Speaker of the N.C. House of Representatives

- Staff has increased for the speaker's office (now 6) and legislature as a whole (now 148).
- A specialized research staff enables the speaker to develop an independent agenda.
- The tradition of one-term speakers has been broken, and succession is now allowed.
- The speaker's office became a full-time position in the push for parity with the Senate and the lieutenant governor's office.
- Election of a Republican governor led to a larger role for Democratic leaders of the opposing party, and especially the speaker.
- Election of a Republican lieutenant governor led Democrats to strip the office of its major legislative duties, thereby enhancing the powers of the Senate president pro tempore directly and the speaker indirectly.
- Increased media attention for speaker's office resulted from all of the above.

Factors Diminishing the Power of the Speaker of the N.C. House of Representatives

- Elimination of pork barrel appropriations for individual members removes a disciplinary tool used by previous speakers.
- More open government means less opportunity to twist arms behind closed doors.
- A larger minority party presence means more opportunities for coalitions to defeat the speaker's agenda.