

A tale of two houses and one governor

Yes, the Republican dominated 2003 Legislature was truly lamentable, painful to the max. Prodded by our Republican governor and legislative leaders, the 2003 Legislature escalated a decade long rush to user-fee the Montana University System.

It robbed local school districts in order to pretend it was providing an increase in state funding of—local school districts.

It slashed and then rubbed salt into state employee wounds.

And it continued to compromise our state's fiscal future with cuts in personal income taxes and capital gains.

Was the 2003 Legislature the worst in history? Perhaps. But in truth, if the more evenly divided (politically speaking) House of Representatives had been left to rule, we might now be celebrating a modicum of success and not recoiling from defeat.

Alas, the governor and the Senate proposed most of the rules, and the rules the legislature ultimately adopted hurt a lot.

Dominating this issue of MEA-MFT TODAY is our 2003 legislative voting record. I urge careful consideration.

Bless the House - almost

Note the bills we prioritized that passed the House. For example, the House passed HB 13, the state pay plan, at 45 cents an hour effective January 1, 2004.

The House passed HB 107 to provide education loan repayment to teachers assuming high demand/low supply positions.

The House passed HB 193 on second reading to create a new entitlement that recognized the unavoidable fixed personnel costs every school district must pay. Unfortunately, HB 193 later died in House Appropriations.

And the House passed HB 302 to create a mandatory statewide school employee health insurance pool.

More remarkable, after excruciating debate that for a brief and shining moment approached statesmanship, the House came within one vote of passing HB 750 by the necessary, and almost impossible to achieve, three-fourths vote. HB 750

provided new revenue now and for years to come, without creating yet another budget black hole to bedevil our interests in future legislatures.

And thank goodness for a couple of House committees that rejected atrocious legislation passed over from a capricious Senate.

The House Taxation Committee tabled SB 267, a demoralizing, unfunded, anti-MEA-MFT proposition to create a signing bonus for certain – but not all – new teachers only.

The House Education Committee tabled SB 120 to encourage a small number of administrators to become independent contractors, and it tabled SB 411 to define basic quality education.

Bless the House. Well, almost. Because in the last analysis, House Republican leaders conspired with the governor and the Senate to increase college and university tuition, compel school districts to fund the retirement cost of federally funded employees, shortchange state employee pay and increase their work loads, and balance the budget with one-time-only money while cutting taxes for those least in need.

The Senate - killing ground

As for the Senate. Twenty-one Democrats and one Republican scored well. One Republican rode the fence. Twenty-seven Republicans gave us the backs of their hands.

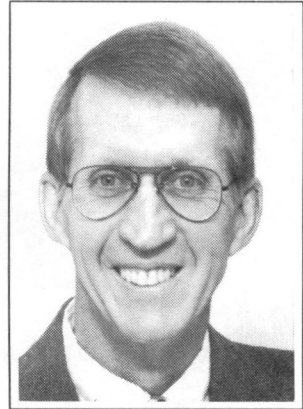
The 2003 Senate was a brew house of corrupt ideas, a killing ground for progressive ones.

And the governor. She did lend support to HB 107 and HB 302. For that we are grateful. Otherwise she proposed, and the legislature lined up hard behind, the grubby outcomes we now suffer.

We can change this, you know. Come the next election cycle we can – indeed we must – retain legislators who support our issues. And we must recruit candidates to run against and beat those who don't. We must elect a new governor.

It is pretty simple, really. The governor and the 2003 Legislature demonstrated a timeless truth: what we do is a function of the political process.

If we want adequate and equitable funding of our university system, public schools, and public employees, then we must elect folks who want these things, too. ■



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