

A SELECTION OF NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS OF THE FORTY-SIXTH SESSION, 1979

This collection of excerpts from newspaper accounts of the Session of 1979 reveal some of the tensions and strategies of working in the evenly-divided House of Representatives. As members, staff, and the press reporting on their actions, groped their way through this unprecedented situation, each story chronicled the ups and downs of the collective efforts to work together and pass legislation, especially the state budget—the critical work of the session.

“Avoiding Political Chaos in Olympia” *Seattle Times*, 11-17-78, A-12
Editorial

“...Although a final certification of last week’s election returns will not be completed until the middle of next week, it looks more and more as though the House will be divided exactly in half between 49 Democrats and 49 Republicans.

Meeting in a rare joint interview with reporters, Bagnariol and Berentson acknowledged that the situation contains the potential for political chaos.

...At this point, the two leaders have discussed only various possibilities. “It’s not possible yet,” said Bagnariol, “to make agreements.” A clearer measure of attitudes among House members may be available after party caucuses this weekend, at which Bagnariol and Berentson are expected to seek authority for continued negotiations on an organization plan.”

“A Split House—What Does It All Mean?” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 11-12-78, A-11
By Mike Layton

“With control of the state House of Representatives still hanging in the balance... A bare majority, in favor of either Republicans or Democrats, could increase the turmoil quotient of the next Legislature beyond anything seen before. Without the comfort of a cushion for true believers of whatever strip, leaders will have to marshal every vote for or against issues. That often leads either to back room deals or stalemates. Or, and this is one more possibility, it could lead to a coalition. Bagnariol, at weeks end, was conceding that perhaps something could be ‘negotiated’ with the Republicans if there is a 49-49 tie between the two parties....Whatever happens, the 1979 session looks to be one of the most dramatic—and possibly the longest—in recent history.”

“Twin ‘Speakers’ Expect a Less Partisan House” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 11-21-78, A-4
By Mike Layton

“The two ‘speakers’ of the 49-49 split House of Representatives said yesterday they expect the House to be less partisan in next year’s legislative session and also less likely to raise taxes... Both leaders said they were not interested in being part of a coalition with dissidents from the opposite party even though they acknowledged that every time a tie has split legislatures in other states coalitions have developed.”

“Legislator: I’d Rather Switch than Fight” *Seattle Times*, 11-25-78, A-7
By Lyle Burt

“The possibility of a coalition to break the 49-49 tie in the House of Representatives was raised by a Democratic legislator yesterday. Representative-elect Carol Monohon OF Raymond, Pacific County, said she ‘would not

rules out' voting with Republicans on organization of the House in January. 'I don't like this stalemate situation,' Mrs. Monohon said.

She says she does not like the plan being discussed by House Speaker John Bagnariol, Renton Democrat, and the Republican floor leader, Duane Berentson of Burlington, to hire an outside person as parliamentarian.

She said she believed the tie would mean that the people of the state would be the ultimate losers. 'I don't want to justify to my people that nothing has been done, Mrs. Monohon said.... 'I can't see going for two years with a 49-49 House. All hell's going to break loose.'

"Twin Speaker Harmony Sure to Hit Sour Notes at Olympia" *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 11-26-78, A-11
By Mike Layton

"They sound like a sales pitch for a stereo set, the 'twin speakers' Berentson and Bagnariol, but don't expect their harmony to stay on key very far into the 1979 legislative session. Maybe two days?
...They're not very different, these two leaders, both conservative, cautious men, neither rabidly partisan...Neither is known as a spellbinding orator or innovator in the fields of government, whether in finances and taxation or social policy.
...They'll be on a tightrope. And keeping the hotheads in their own caucuses on the same tight line will be the toughest job they've ever had."

"Two Speakers to Preside Over House" *Seattle Times*, 12-22-78
By Lyle Burt

"For the first time in its history, Washington's House of Representatives will have two Speakers to run it during the regular session, which convenes January 8. The agreement on co-speakers, in preference to hiring an outside presiding officer, was announced Wednesday by the present Democratic Speaker, John Bagnariol, and Republican leader, Duane Berentson...Bagnariol said the question of which speaker will wield the gavel when the House is in session probably will be decided on a day-to-day basis. The two said there also will be two chief clerks and two sergeant-at-arms, one of each to be selected by each party...Berentson, who earlier had advocated hiring an outsider to preside over the lower chamber, said Bagnariol's co-speaker approach was agreed to because of the difficulty of finding someone who would be acceptable to both parties."

"Co-Chairmen Key to Legislative Success" *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 12-24-78, A-3
By Mike Layton

"Two determined women will share the leadership of one of the most powerful organizations in the state when the Legislature convenes here January 8. Reps. Helen Sommers, Seattle Democrat, and Ellen Craswell, Bremer-ton Republican, are the 'co-chairmen' of the powerful House Revenue Committee. In the coming session it will consider and act—one way or another—on such thorny issues as tax limitation, a new timber tax rate and property tax exemptions.

Legislative staff members expect the two women to work well together despite their partisan differences and differences in their backgrounds. They know from experience that Sommers can be blunt, even cutting, when things do not go well. She works hard and expects others to do so, too. The staff, however, expects that Craswell may be unbending, too, when tough questions are tackled.

One of the first indications of how the two will function will be revealed when the first committee agenda is established. If there is ever to be a deadlock in the committee—or in any of the other House committees, for that matter—the setting of the first agenda is as likely a juncture for it as any. Each woman must work with her caucus, the other 48 persons on her side of the aisle.”

“Suggestions Offered by Dakota Senator” *Daily Olympian*, 12-27-78, A-9
Unsigned AP Article

“The way they plan to do it here, it’s very hard for me to imagine it will work,” Hoffner said... Democrats and Republicans in the Washington House have agreed to split the duties of the speaker between Democrat John Bagnariol and Republican Duane Berentson. Seven committees have co-chairmen while the other 14 chairmanships were evenly divided between the two parties.”

“1979 Legislature Will be Dull, But Short” *Argus*, 12-29-78
By Scott Maier

“...It’s going to have to be a much more disciplined Legislature. Leadership will have to play a larger role,” said Berentson. This places those in power in the politically difficult position of having to negotiating bipartisan compromises that won’t alienate party loyalists.

“The leadership is going to be vulnerable,” said John Bagnariol, Democratic House Speaker. “Militant members on both sides are going to be angry, saying we are compromising too much.”

“Muddy Road Ahead” *Daily Olympian*, 1-7-79
By Fred Olson

“Washington’s Legislature convenes here Monday amid speculation over how an evenly divided House of Representatives will affect the 46th annual gathering of lawmakers. Democrats and Republicans are tied at 49-apiece, and so far neither party is talking about forming a coalition to break the deadlock... The even split raises questions about how long the session will last and what might be accomplished. Still another unknown is the role of Gov. Dixy Lee Ray... Olympia area lawmakers feel the session will focus on a new state budget and refinement of major legislation that was passed two years ago. Because the House lacks a majority to push through controversial measures, most area lawmakers believe that many sensitive issues may be delayed this year.”

“As Legislature Opens: Sugar in House, Spice in Senate” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 1-9-79, A-3
By Mike Layton

“Washington’s evenly divided House got off to a smooth, even sugary start yesterday, while the usually more sedate Senate plunged into an immediate partisan battle... The evenly divided House... was in a relaxed and jovial mood as it began an experiment in coexistence. The 49 Democrats elected John Bagnariol, D-Renton, their speaker, and the 49 Republicans elected Duane Berentson, R-Burlington, theirs. The state’s first house to be divided evenly on partisan lines adjourned for the day after Rep. Irving Newhouse, R-Mabton, presented the two speakers with a two-handled gavel.

All was hearts and flowers as the two speakers hosted receptions at which identical brands of champagne were served to members, their families and friends.

The House adopted rules also, agreed to ahead of time by Berentson and Bagnariol, with only a routine vote. Never before in the memory of anyone here has either house adopted rules for a session so soon.”

“Two House Speakers Unite Against Dixy” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 1-10-79 A-1
By Mike Layton

“The first fight of the two-day old 45th Legislature erupted yesterday with the two Speakers of the House taking strong exception to Gov. Dixy Lee Ray’s approach to tackling local government problems.”

“Berentson’s Cut-Off Plan Irks Demos” *Daily Olympian*, 1-12-79
By David Ammons

“Is the honeymoon over in the House of Representatives? After four days of almost saccharine bliss in the House, frictions and critical comments began to surface Thursday. It threatens the delicate balance in the House, with its unprecedented 49-49 party split.

The catalyst was Republican Speaker Duane Berentson’s decision to call a press conference to announce the GOP plan for a forced march aimed at an adjournment after 60 days. Involved are such deadlines as passing the multibillion dollar state budget in 34 more days.

Democratic Speaker John Bagnariol, who sat in on the news gathering, was upset and held a press conference of his own in the Democratic caucus room next door. He was furious with Berentson for splashing the GOP proposal to reporters rather than sitting down in private with the Democrats to try to work out an agreement.”

“A Budget ‘on or Before 75th Day of Session’” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 1-13-79, A-7
By Mike Layton

“The two chairmen of the House Appropriations Committee yesterday set up a schedule to adopt the state budget by the House ‘on or before the 75th day of the session.’ The announcement was made to members by its Republican chairman, Rep. Scott Blair, Seattle, with Democratic Chairman Alan Thompson, Castle Rock, concurring...The announcement flies in the face of numerous public calls recently for keeping the session within the 60 days prescribed by the state constitution for a regular session...At least two other committees yesterday set schedules that will run their activity beyond the 60th day.

Blair’s Democratic counterpart, Rep. Alan Thompson, Castle Rock, said the Appropriations Committee has ‘embarked on an accelerated schedule. We’ll be holding two public hearings at the same time (with subcommittees), something that’s never been done before,’ Thompson said.

Thompson said the Republican 60-day suggestion was ‘ludicrous. The only way you can reduce the amount of time is to cut out public input in the process (hearings),’ he said.”

“House ‘Balancing Act’ Tottering Over Plans for Length of Session,” *Seattle Times*, 1-13-79, A-1
By Peter Rinearson

“I think we’ve all been walking on eggs, and the first egg just broke,” said Representative Ron Dunlap, Bellevue Republican. House Republican leaders last night accused the Democrats of trying to stretch out the length of the legislative session to discredit a Republican plan for a 60-day session.

...Polk said he believes the Democratic leadership instructed the staff to work out a protracted schedule in order to discredit the Republican plan. He called it “arrogant” and “contemptuous,” and said “it will roughen the edges” between the parties.

But the Democratic co-chairman of the Appropriations Committee, Representative Alan Thompson of Kelso, said that neither politics nor the staff had anything to do with the timetable. “The requirements of the budget require more than 60 days,” Thompson said. “I emphatically deny that this was a staff plan. Scott Blair (the Republican co-chairman of Appropriations) and I developed it jointly, and the policy was entirely our own. Representative Blair and I agree that bad decisions are made hastily,” Thompson said.

“Legislators Draw Battle Lines” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 1-17-79, B-3
By Mike Layton

Discusses annual session proposal, tensions around the 60-day session limit with Gov. Ray, changes in the Senate leadership, county ‘home rule’ issues.

“Legislature Bobs and Weaves Way into Fourth Week” *The Daily Olympian*, 1-29-79, A-9
By John White

“...So far there have been no big disagreements and there is a good attitude of cooperation, said Bagnariol. One controversial issue the House can’t dodge, however, is the operating budget for the two-year fiscal period that begins next July 1. That bill is scheduled to originate in the House this year.”

“Fragile Truce Brings Calm to Olympia” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 2-6-79, B-3
By Mike Layton

“The situation is potentially as volatile as any in the history of the Legislature. But with neither side wanting to appear to be the one which breaks the fragile truce, both are walking very cautiously. The two speakers, Democrat John Bagnariol and Republican Duane Berentson, are still meeting together, alternating at the rostrum and discussing most activities in advance. It is in the committees, however, where cooperation is most impressive. There have no doubt been frictions but they haven’t burst into open flames.”

“Love’s Labor Lost in House Committee” *Seattle Times*, 2-11-79, D-9
By Richard Larson

Describes how heavily partisan issues strain the working relationship within committees and between the parties.

“House Passes Operating Budget” *Seattle Times*, 3-28-79, A-4
By Peter Rinearson

“While neither Democrats nor Republicans in the House were completely pleased with their proposed state budget, both parties were delighted today that it finally cleared the lower chamber...By a vote of 58 to 40, the House of Representatives last night passed a proposed \$8.83 billion state-operating budget to the Senate.” Details about compromises *struck*...

“Ray Castigates Co-Speakers of House” *Seattle Times*, 3-7-79, B-1

By Lyle Burt

“The open feud between Gov. Dixy Lee Ray and the House of Representatives has widened with the disclosure of a castigating letter written by the governor to the two co-Speakers of the lower chamber.”

Details areas of contention with governor and responses by co-Speakers...shows working relation...

“House Tie Wasn’t a Bomb After All, Say Lawmakers” *Seattle Times*, 3-18-79

By Peter Rinearson

“...This is history,” said Representative Al Bauer, Vancouver Democrat. “It defies conventional political theory. We’ve proved that the public good can be achieved, irrespective of the partisan political balances, when there is no alternative.”

“The even split has caused the House to act the way citizens believe it should act all the time,” Said Representative Ron Dunlap, Bellevue Republican. Issues have been decided on their merits more than on the basis of political considerations, he said.

“When the regular session ended March 8, 157 bills had been passed by both the House and Senate and sent to the governor. Several of the measures, including revisions in the juvenile-justice code, are significant.

“Blair acknowledged that some particularly partisan issues can’t be dealt with effectively with a tie, but he said that is not a problem, as long as there isn’t a tie every year.

“It required complete agreement at the initial stage, or the bills didn’t get anywhere,” Bauer said. Everyone knew that a big difference between the parties would be the kiss of death to an important measure, so disagreements were resolved in advance, he said.

“The tie has worked great,” said Representative Joe Taller, Seattle Republican. “It’s forced people to work together. Neither party can ramrod a measure through. We’ve seen very little partisanship on the floor. We’ve now had people talking together who last session didn’t even give each other the time of day. You’ve got to spend time with people who would be adversaries to try to get them as allies.”

“So far, so good” *Seattle Times*, 3-12-79, A-12

Unsigned

“...the House chose to practice the politics of responsibility.”

“House Gets Stereo From Speakers” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 4-1-79

By Shelby Scates

“...After, the two sides would be forced to face each other with deadlocked votes on critical issues of state, even if they resolved the really important internal matters of selecting a speaker, committee chairmen, staff, office space and parking slots. What a fine mess it seemed to make of the legislative process, what a colossal goof on the part of the constitutional writers to allow the possibility of an evenly divided House. Or so we said at the time.”

“We were wrong as far as it goes in Olympia...The most intriguing fact of life along Budd Inlet in Olympia is the surprising cooperation between Republicans and Democrats in the House.”

“Critics, who never thought it possible, are applauding the work of co-Speakers Duane Berentson, R-Burlington, and John Bagnariol, D-Renton, in holding the House together in the face of this extreme condition...”

Berentson and Bagnariol, both in their late 40s, personal friends and veterans of a dozen sessions, have kept the process going nicely, despite partisan differences and ideologically divided caucuses. Each confronts liberal and conservative factions in their respective memberships.”

“They vowed last November to keep the process responsible and working and so far have succeeded beyond the best expectations of observers in Olympia. It isn’t easy. ‘It requires more time and patience than a normal operation,’” said Bagnariol, the Speaker in 1977 when the Democrats held a whopping majority. ‘I mean we can’t make a decision in our caucus and carry it out. No way. We’ve got to negotiate everything. Duane and I work well together and we’ve been determined to show that it could be done.’”

“Legislature near Adjournment: House Republicans Allow Demo Budget” *Seattle Times*, 6-1-79, A-1
By Peter Rinearson

“The Legislature was on the verge of adjournment today, after House Republicans finally caved in yesterday and allowed a Democratic state budget of 9.9 billion to pass...It was Berentson’s token vote that allowed the budget to pass in the House... ‘I don’t think I need to tell you how painful it was to cast that vote. But the vote had to be given,’ Berentson said. Democrats had sought a single House Republican vote for about three weeks. Until yesterday, however, all 49 House Republicans voted against the Democratic budget, while Republican leaders tried to wrestle concessions from the Democrats.

Berentson lashed out at the Democrats, including the governor, for insisting the Republicans accept the Democrats’ budget. He repeated his contention that the budget was badly drafted and too expensive. “I don’t think I’ve ever witnessed such an uncompromising, arrogant attitude as that of the Senate Democrats,” Berentson said.

Some spectators clapped after Berentson cast the 50th vote for the budget. But passage of the budget was anticlimactic. Awaited anxiously for weeks, final passage came ‘with a whimper not a bang.’”

“Slow and Unproductive Legislature Winds it Up: Lackluster Legislature Ends” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 6-3-79, A-1, A-12
By Mike Layton

“The 46th Legislative Session adjourned at 3 a.m. yesterday, ending the fourth-longest session—and probably one of the most lackluster ones—in state history. Some say it was the least productive session, although many of the major contending forces left here yesterday fairly well satisfied.”