

## 'OBJECTION! OBJECTION!' - GENERAL ASSEMBLY GETS OFF TO BOISTEROUS START - MOSS MAINTAINS SPEAKERSHIP AMID UPROAR

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Democrats yesterday rammed through the re-election of Speaker Thomas W. Moss Jr. of Norfolk, capping a day of parliamentary "Wrestlemania" that Republicans said wrongly denied them an equal say in the almost-evenly divided House.

Contentious but dignified debate yielded to shouts of "Objection! Objection!" as some Republicans rhythmically slammed their desk tops while Democrats installed Moss as speaker. He has held the post since 1991.

Republicans hollered "Shame! Shame!" and three turned their backs as Chief Justice Harry J. Carrico swore in Moss.

The dramatic opening to the 1998 General Assembly, at times evocative of the British parliament famed for its raucous outbursts, likely portends a nasty 60-day session in which lawmakers are expected to act on such popular issues as Republican Gov.-elect James S. Gilmore III's plan to effectively end the local car tax.

The struggle for control of the House, in which Democrats hold 50 seats to the Republicans' 49, will resume today. Republicans are pushing for proportional representation on House committees, the most powerful of which are dominated by Democrats.

Yesterday's spectacle, despite two rounds of private negotiations and extended closed sessions of the party caucuses, could imperil efforts by Democrats and Republicans to nudge the 100-member House toward power-sharing, legislators said.

The House's one independent tends to vote with the GOP. Lawmakers will be so embittered and preoccupied with political survival that "you'll have 50 sheep running in 50 different directions, and you'll never get them all back in the pen again," said Del. Thomas M. Jackson Jr., D-Carroll.

Still, both sides held out the possibility that some accommodation can be reached. In addition to near parity in the makeup of committees, senior delegates are discussing the possibility of first-ever Republican or shared chairmanships.

Despite the Republicans' first-ever sweep last year of the statewide offices and fortified presence in the legislature, the GOP yesterday seemed incapable of capitalizing on its political gains.

"They have a numerical majority in one house; effective parity in the other and control neither," said political analysts Robert D. Holsworth of Virginia Commonwealth University.

An even split in the Senate two years ago forced a power-sharing agreement in the 40-member body that House Republicans and a smattering of Democrats hoped to replicate yesterday. The GOP expects to claim an absolute majority in the Senate after a special election Tuesday.

At the root of yesterday's six-hour escapade was the House's refusal to seat three Republicans elected in special contests Tuesday. The Virginia Supreme Court ruled that state election officials did not have to accelerate certification of the newly minted delegates so they could be seated in time to vote for the speaker.

Republicans attempted an end-run to put the party at full strength by enlisting a notary public to administer the oath of office to the three Republican delegates-elect. Ultimately held to 46 seats, they believed they could pair their 49 votes with that of the House's only independent, Lacey E. Putney of Bedford, to name him speaker.

"The whole thing could have been taken care of if the three members had been seated," said Del. Leo Waldrup, R-Virginia Beach, head of the House GOP caucus. "What they call an olive branch I interpret as a sharp stick in the eye."

Republican legislators contended that the wide margins by which the three new members were swept into office should dispel any doubts about the validity of the elections. However, Democrats countered the results still needed to be certified by the state Board of Elections, which likely won't happen until tomorrow.

That didn't stop the new three from physically taking their seats on the House floor.

Lee Ware Jr. of Powhatan, Harry B. Blevins of Chesapeake and Michele B. McQuigg still held up their right hands and took the oath of

office administered to the other 97 lawmakers by House Clerk Bruce F. Jamerson.

"We ought to put the people who have been elected by their citizens in place," said Del. Jack Rust, R-Fairfax, who led the floor fight to have the new members legally take their seats. "We ought to have leadership in place that reflects 100 members, not 97."

The battle was joined when Jamerson struck down Rust's motion to have the House seat the new members. After hours of parliamentary polemics, Democrats were able to push through a vote on Moss over the vociferous and often shrill objections of Republicans.

In an outburst Capitol veterans said they had never witnessed before, some Republican members shouted and slammed their desktops as Democrats triumphantly voted Moss into another term as speaker.

"This is illegitimate power," said Del. Robert G. Marshall, R-Prince William, who screamed "Objection!" repeatedly as Democrats voted, drowning out the proceedings. "This is Sherman's march through Georgia."

As Moss was sworn in, several Republicans stood and turned their back in silent protest. Later, in retaliation for Jamerson's ruling against Rust, about half of the Republicans refused to vote on the clerk's election.

"I hope that 100 years from now, when scholars are doing research on the Virginia legislature, they will see that how the speaker of the House was selected was a flawed process," said Del. John S. "Jack" Reid, R-Henrico, one of the backturners.

Del. Robert F. McDonnell, R-Virginia Beach, and one of the House negotiators, said, "It was a disgraceful election and it sets a terrible tone for the next 60 days."

Democrats stood by their vote, saying math was on their side. "The fact of the matter is the state Board of Elections, Richmond Circuit Court and the Virginia Supreme Court have determined that there were 97 elected members in place," said Del. Clifton A. "Chip" Woodrum, D-Roanoke.

"The screaming, shouting, banging on the desks, cursing on the floor - it's never been done before. It's disappointing that ladies and gentlemen would act like that. But ladies and gentlemen would not act like that."

- Caption: PHOTO
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