



IN THE LEGISLATURE

Budget Committee Chairmen Sharing New Wealth — Of Knowledge

by Paul O'Connor

This regular Insight feature examines an aspect of the legislative process as it affects public policy. In this article, the writer takes a look at a recent expansion of budget-making powers by the legislative leadership.

Reporters lunching in the Legislative Building cafeteria one day this spring were startled when Rep. William T. "Billy" Watkins beckoned them back to a joint House-Senate Appropriations Committee meeting from which they had been unceremoniously ejected a mere hour earlier.

The 15 chairmen of the appropriations subcommittees had been summoned to Raleigh on March 3 for an untold purpose. As legislative staff members arrived, they were told to leave. Before the meeting began, House Expansion Budget Committee Chairman Watkins (D-Granville) asked lobbyists and news reporters to leave also. Then the doors were slammed shut.

An hour later, the doors swung open and sulking reporters were invited inside to hear Watkins announce a new appropriations procedure that could dramatically disperse legislative power to subcommittee chairmen—in a legislature where the budget power traditionally is held in the tight fists of a very few.

On its face, the announcement appeared almost routine. Henceforth, the 15 subcommittee chairmen (one Senate and two House chairmen for each of the five subcommittees) would be expected to meet monthly with the legislature's Fiscal Research Division staff to prepare staff work plans and monitor budget developments. Then the subcommittee chairmen would report their progress to the chairmen of the full Appropriations Committees. In effect, it could make the 15 chairmen the most knowledgeable, and potentially the most powerful, legislators in their individual budget

areas and break the inner circle's exclusive grip on the budget by spreading knowledge and power to more members—from five to 20 legislators. Those are in addition to two others who figure heavily in budget decisions—Speaker of the House Liston Ramsey (D-Madison), who is a legislator, and Lt. Gov. Robert Jordan, who is not a legislator but who does preside over the Senate.

"This definitely represents the dispersing of power from that small group (of full budget committee leaders) to a larger group," says Rep. Daniel T. Blue (D-Wake), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee on Human Resources. (The legislature refers to these 15 subcommittees as full committees, such as the subcommittee headed by Blue.)

"This change will give more input to the subcommittee chairmen and to the members of their committees," adds Sen. Aaron Plyler (D-Union), chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. "For years, we've been accused of not having it (the appropriations process) open."

During regular sessions in odd-numbered years, the Appropriations Committee breaks up into five subcommittees: human resources, crime and public safety, general government, education, and natural and economic resources. These subcommittees meet for five months, going line-by-line through the base and the expansion budgets, which comprise the state's biennial \$16.6 billion budget. Programs get approved, and programs get axed.

But then, as the legislative session winds down, the top Appropriations Committee chairmen get together in a closed session and fit the

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final budget together. Much of the subcommittees' work is retained, but some of it disappears. "I've had times when we took things out, and when the budget came back (from that closed meeting), it was back in there. You were surprised to see it, and then you weren't," says Rep. R. Donald Beard (D-Cumberland), chairman of the House Expansion Budget Committee on General Government.

Those surprise changes usually come without the foreknowledge of even the chairman of the subcommittee that reviewed the budget. Watkins, one of the key inner-circle figures in recent years, concedes that the past practice could make rank-and-file members of the subcommittee feel as though their work had been for naught. With the new procedure, Watkins says, the subcommittee chairmen will be the legislators who are more proficient in their specific areas. "We intend to have them in the final super subcommittee meeting that puts the final (budget) document together," Watkins adds.

If the process really has been opened up, the question that logically follows is why? Why would the budget leaders want to give up the power they've held tightly for years? At least four theories come to mind to explain this legislative change of heart.

The first could be called the "IT'S BIGGER THAN BOTH OF US, BILLY, SO LET'S GET SOME HELP" THEORY. Rep. David Diamont (D-Surry), chairman of the House Expansion Budget Committee on Human Resources, explains this theory: "The budget is so big, it's so complex, that no longer can any one person have control. It's too complicated." Thus, legislative leaders badly need the help that the subcommittee chairmen can provide to help keep track of the budget, which has quadrupled in size in the last 20 years. Further complicating the process is the difficulty of a small group drafting a complex state budget at a time when federal aid to states is being slashed.

So how about theory two, which could be called the "WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE, ANYWAY?" THEORY. The legislative leadership subscribes—publicly, anyway—to this notion. Two legislators who have pulled the strings for years, Watkins and Sen. Kenneth Royall (D-Durham), chairman of the Senate Ways and Means Committee, say the new procedure is designed to reverse a power shift from legislators to staff. "In Washington, they tell me, the staff has taken over the Congress. It could easily happen here," says Watkins. "The climate is right." Royall agrees. "It's been getting more like Washington."

Several chairmen grumble about isolated

instances where staff members had exercised considerable influence over legislation. Royall recalls two instances where he felt a staff member was trying to undermine legislative proposals, both of which Royall supported. In the first, Royall says, the administrative cost of a career ladder program for teachers was overstated; in the second, the effectiveness of the Eckerd Wilderness Camps was understated. Legislative staffers, who serve at the pleasure of the leadership, would not discuss the subjects for the record. (In these cases, Royall's perception may have been that the facts presented by the staff argued against his positions.)

Sen. Anthony Rand (D-Cumberland), chairman of the Senate Base Budget Committee, says there has been a feeling among appropriations leaders "that some of the stuff coming out [of the Fiscal Research Division] reflected the bias of the staff." Rand also reports that there have been complaints by some executive branch members that fiscal staffers had gotten into research projects without direction to do so from the legislature, and that they had tried to intimidate uncooperative executive branch officials. Legislative staffers privately point out that they often are given no direction from legislators, and thus must choose between initiating research on their own or sitting idle.

Royall says the problem is one of knowledge. Staff works full time on the budget and is much more knowledgeable than the legislators. Royall is quick to lay the blame with the legislature and not with the staff. "In many cases," Royall points out, the subcommittee chairmen "go in there and turn the meeting over to the staff. [The subcommittee chairmen] are going to have to do a lot more work than they have been doing. If the legislators are going to run the legislature, the chairmen will have to take a lot more active role and become better versed in the whole picture." They will also have to guard against politicizing the fiscal research staff, veteran observers point out.

Watkins, too, faults the legislature for the growth of staff power. "The fiscal research staff works for the appropriations committees, and yet they have had no direction from the group they work for [during the] 12 months" between the end of a regular session and the beginning of a short session, he says.

Veteran legislative observers point out that the change may starkly illuminate the differences in ability, expertise, and effectiveness of some subcommittee chairmen. It may well be that the Senate chairmen, who have more experience and who have worked with the budget longer, will become more accomplished in budget-making than

some of their less-experienced House subcommittee colleagues.

Others feel that the primary motive for the change is political. Immediate press questions of Watkins focused on the Democratic-controlled legislature's stormy relationship with the Republican administration of Gov. James G. Martin, and whether the move was designed to allow the Democrats to keep a closer eye on the Martin administration. Watkins denied a political motivation, and Martin's top lobbyist, former state Rep. Ward Purrington, discounted politics as a factor. "It sounds like an organizational improvement to me. It's involving more people in the decision-making, and we favor opening up the legislature to more input."

Juicier political speculation centers on the 1988 race for lieutenant governor, a race which might pit Watkins and Rand against each other. That brings up the third theory, which might be called "THE SUNSHINE BOYS" THEORY—for a legislative leadership attempting to let the sun shine in on the budget process. One legislator who could gain from a new "sunshine" reputation is none other than Billy Watkins, who otherwise would enter the race with a reputation for years of legislative backroom wheeling and dealing. One senior senator explains: "Out there in the public, Billy's image is that he's a hard, mean legislator who wants to keep hold of the process. I think this is Billy's attempt to look softer, more open. You know Tony (Rand) doesn't need that."

Rand doesn't buy that theory. "I find that hard to believe. That ain't Billy's style. Billy's still going to do as Billy always does if he can get away with it," says Rand.

More than one legislator could benefit from the move. Having subcommittee chairmen make the hard decisions could take the heat off both Watkins and Rand. Yet both Watkins and Rand can always dominate the debate on issues that would be especially beneficial to their political futures, and they can still take the credit for making those decisions.

Finally, there is the "MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE WALL, WHO'S THE OPENEST OF THEM ALL?" THEORY, reflected in the cynicism of one senior senator: "It's all for image. It can't be anything else." This view concludes that Watkins is trying to make himself look good, and Lt. Gov. Robert Jordan is trying to appear as though he's fulfilled a campaign promise to open up the process. But in

the end, the senator said, the same four or five legislators will still make the important decisions.

Regardless of the reasons, another question is what difference will it all make? For one thing, Watkins says, the new process will forestall the development of a full-time legislature. If the 20 budget leaders aren't staying up with fiscal development, then the entire legislature will have to stay in Raleigh to do so. So the onus is on the 15 subcommittee chairmen to keep up to date on budget matters.

Of course, for some legislators, like Royall, Plyler, and Watkins, the legislature is already a full-time job. And as Blue points out, the new budget procedures will increase the number of full-time legislators, and could speed the arrival of a completely full-time assembly. "Before," says Blue, "it (the budget process) was overwhelming four chairmen. Now it might not be overwhelming, but it will call for much more time from the other 15 chairmen." Soon, each committee will begin to develop specialists in individual fields of interests and those legislators will begin working full time, Blue predicted.

The possibility of 20 or more full-time legislators is troubling to many observers. The time demands of the General Assembly already make it extremely difficult for anyone who is not self-employed, retired, or wealthy to serve. A few legislators, like Diamont, a teacher and coach in Surry County, are not so financially independent. Will Diamont and others like him be able to aspire to full-time budget chairmanships? Maybe not, says Diamont. He's already had to take himself out of consideration for spots on the Advisory Budget Commission and the Joint Legislative Commission on Governmental Operations because of the time demands they make on legislators. But Royall and Watkins say the legislature can't allow that to happen. In cases like Diamont's, the staff should go to the legislator's home, or call him on the phone, they say.

If those 20 members do, in fact, become full-timers, then the legislative branch is in for a dramatic dispersal of power. The inner circle might retain the power to determine how much will go into each general category of spending, but the enormous power to determine where within that category the money will be spent will reside with the subcommittee chairmen.

And once that power has been dispersed, can it be gathered in again?

"No," says House Speaker Liston Ramsey. "And it probably shouldn't ever be pulled back in."

