

## *Is the House Speaker a Household Name?*

**I**s the House Speaker a household name in North Carolina? Maybe, maybe not. But if recent House speakers have been able to elevate the profile of the office, that certainly hasn't always been the case.

Pat Taylor tells of the poll he took when he began his gubernatorial campaign in 1972. Taylor had served as a state legislator and been the House speaker in 1965. In 1968, he'd been elected lieutenant governor and had then served four years in statewide office. All that time, it was no political secret that Taylor wanted to be governor. So he commissioned a poll to find out what the people of North Carolina thought of him.

"Who's Pat Taylor?" was the underwhelming response. Taylor found that only 18 percent of those polled could recognize his name.

Historically, House speakers have not been well known statewide. Taylor readily acknowledges that he wasn't widely known. David Britt, his successor, says he wasn't well-known either. Carl Stewart says he began to develop statewide name recognition only when he began his campaign for lieutenant governor in 1980.

But the state's last three speakers may have elevated the public recognition level of House speakers. "It's fair to say that the speaker is evolving into a statewide figure," says Al Adams, a prominent lobbyist and former representative.

Liston Ramsey became a statewide figure because he served in office for eight years, became extremely powerful, and, in the last four years of his reign, became the target of Republican wrath. Former Gov. Jim Martin used his bully pulpit to raise Ramsey's visibility—albeit not in an attempt to boost the Madi-

son County Democrat's popularity rating.

Joe Mavretic led a coalition of Republicans and Democrats and toppled Ramsey in 1989. He served for only two years, but got a tremendous amount of press for defeating Ramsey.

Current Speaker Dan Blue says he is a well-known personality. "I have much greater name recognition," he says. In 1991, when Blue reunited House Democrats, he also became the state's highest-ranking elected Democrat. At the time, both the governor and lieutenant governor were Republicans. "I was carrying the water from the standpoint of carrying the Democratic faithful," Blue says.

Blue says he suspects that he has achieved a higher profile in part because he was North Carolina's first African-American speaker. "I got heavy media attention early on because I did something no other black person [in North Carolina] had ever done," says Blue. "Twenty-five percent of the state's population is black, and my name is well-known in the black population."<sup>1</sup>

Blue says his race gave him national recognition. He is only the second black House speaker in the country—the other is Willie Brown of California—so he says he's been recognized as a black leader by the media and interest groups nationwide.

The combination of both his race and the Republican Party's controlling the executive branch of state government led to increased visibility for Blue. Will the next speaker be as well known?

Blue doesn't think so. He says even if he is followed by the state's first female speaker, she will not be the lead spokesperson for the party unless the governor is of the other party. Alaska presently has a female speaker, Ramona Barnes, and other states also have had female speakers.

So female speakers may be considered less unusual.

But Blue and his immediate predecessors—Ramsey and Mavretic—also say that future speakers aren't likely to be as obscure as the speakers of the Sixties and before. "The whole name of the game is networking," Mavretic says.

A modern speaker must get out and about in the state, forging ties to various groups. In the process, the speaker becomes better known. Blue says in 1991 and 1992, he found himself giving as many as nine speeches a week, to all kinds of groups. Ramsey adds that modern media coverage of the legislature helps elevate the profile of the speaker.

Will the day come when the speaker goes fishing on the coast and people crowd around seeking his autograph? Blue says they already look at him funny, like they are *supposed* to know who he is. It might be another decade, however, before they figure it out.

—Paul O'Connor

#### FOOTNOTE

<sup>1</sup> The 1990 Census found blacks comprise 22 percent of the North Carolina population. For more on the 1990 Census and its implications for the state's future, see Ken Otterbourg and Mike McLaughlin, "North Carolina's Demographic Destiny: The Policy Implications of the 1990 Census," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (August 1993), pp. 2-49.



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**House Speaker Dan Blue fields questions at a news conference.**