

# The Evolution of the Speaker's Office

by Paul T. O'Connor

---

*This article traces the evolution of the office of the Speaker of the N.C. House of Representatives, from a part-time position closed at the end of the legislative session, to today's bustling office with six full-time staff members. The profile of the speaker has been raised by media attention and the partisan twists of the state's recent political history. And the power of the office has been consolidated through succession for the speaker (the ability to seek more than one consecutive term), competition with the rival legislative chamber, the Senate, and competition with the executive branch.*

*As a result of these developments, the speaker has become a political figure with his own agenda, rather than a presiding officer concerned primarily with carrying out the governor's agenda. And the speaker may be evolving into a figure known statewide, which could mean the office will become an alternative stepping stone to higher office.*

*Given all of the developments in the evolution of the speaker's office—including increased staff, a pattern of serving multiple terms, more intensive media coverage, and equal status among legislative leaders—it may seem today's speaker is more powerful than those of earlier times. Yet today's speaker governs more by consensus than past speakers, who depended on a handful of lawmakers to carry out their will.*

*More open government and Republican gains in the legislature have forced the speaker to share more power with the rank and file. And a powerful disciplinary tool, pork barrel for individual members, has been lost. There remains some debate about whether the speaker of today is more powerful than those of recent history.*

**A**s the 1993 legislative session rushed to an end in mid-July, N.C. House Speaker Dan Blue assigned Lori Ann Harris, his research analyst, to scour the California statutes. Her mission? To find ways to assure that minority businesses would participate in work created by the \$740 million package of education, clean water, and park bonds that was to go before the voters in November 1993.

At the same time, Alan Briggs, Blue's legal counsel, represented the speaker in negotiations on highly technical aspects of workers' compensation reform. Meanwhile Blue's press secretary, Chris Fitzsimon, was meeting with reporters in the legislative press room, putting a spin on the week's events that would be to the liking of the House leadership.

## I. Historical Evolution

**N**ow look back to the 1967 legislative session, when House Speaker David Britt faced the crush of legislative duties, his impending move from the legislative branch to a seat on the N.C. Court of Appeals, and a commencement address that he'd been asked to make at Appalachian State University. To whom did Speaker Britt go for help? "Dr. Preston Edsall at N.C. State [University] had a number of interns working [at the legislature] as part of their coursework. I turned to one of them—my cousin—who was an undergraduate at the time."

In comparing the office of 25 or 30 years ago, the most obvious and undisputed difference is in the staff available to the speaker. But why has staff increased so steadily? In what other ways has the office evolved? And when all is said and done, is today's speaker any more powerful than three decades ago?

### A. More Staff But More Work

Britt and his predecessors usually had only a secretary and the help of college student interns. The speaker now can seek assistance from both a

personal staff of well-educated specialists like Harris, Briggs, and Fitzsimon, and a much larger staff in the legislature's bill drafting, automated systems, general research, and fiscal research divisions.

Blue has a staff of six employees and a budget of nearly \$525,000 a year.<sup>1</sup> While Britt occupied a suite of two small offices, Blue's staff fills seven offices in the newly remodeled, 2300 quadrant of the Legislative Building. (Senate President Pro Tempore Marc Basnight and his staff similarly have occupied the 2000 quadrant.)

Of course, the entire legislative staff has mushroomed since Britt held the speaker's office nearly three decades ago. In Britt's day, the only legislative employees were temporaries, the principal clerks, and secretaries. The janitors were employed by the executive branch. On July 30, one week after the 1993 session adjourned, the Legislative Services Commission issued paychecks to 148 full-time, permanent employees.

Observers say the responsibilities of the speaker's office have grown on nearly every front—from selecting people for appointments to a burgeoning number of committees and commissions to even the seemingly mundane task of answering constituent mail. Kaye Gattis, former Speaker Carl Stewart's secretary from 1977 to 1980 and now administrative assistant to Lt. Gov. Dennis Wicker, says growth has been

tremendous in constituent contact with officeholders like House speaker, governor, and lieutenant governor. Someone must answer that mail.

Staff also has grown for reasons other than administration. In 1968, the General Assembly hired its first legislative services officer, John Brooks.<sup>2</sup> The action was North Carolina's entry in a nationwide movement to make state legislatures more professional and independent. In 1970, the General Assembly hired its first full-time lawyer, Clyde Ball, making him head of the General Research Division. And in 1972, the Assembly hired Fiscal Research Director Mercer Doty and three fiscal analysts.

Since those hirings, the staff increases have been steady. With the exception of 1983, legislative staff has increased every year for 21 years,

***"Clearly, we see now, that [the speakership] can be a position of affirmative and aggressive leadership."***

—GOV. JIM HUNT

*Paul O'Connor is a columnist for the Capitol Press Association. He has covered the General Assembly since 1979.*

sometimes by as many as 20 employees, as occurred in 1989.

Blue agrees that the biggest difference in the speaker of today and the speaker of Britt's era is staff, but he focuses on the *research* staff, rather than the *administrative* staff. "The resources available to me are tremendously different, and those resources bring about independence," says Blue. "The staff gives the legislative branch the ability to independently determine what the real facts are. We're not limited to getting our information just from lobbyists, just from the governor's office. We can determine on our own what state agency spending patterns are, what the tendencies of that agency are."

### ***B. More Staff Enables the Speaker to Develop an Independent Agenda***

Does independence for the speaker and the legislative branch bring more power to the office? The answer depends upon who you ask. But an independent speaker clearly has increased *resources* to pursue his own agenda, and many think that modern speakers now do that.

Gov. Jim Hunt, asked to cite the major difference between today's speaker and those in office when he became lieutenant governor in 1973, cites

the speaker's agenda. "Historically, speakers did not have programs that they supported," says Hunt. "Clearly, we see now, that [the speakership] can be a position of affirmative and aggressive leadership."

Reporters who covered the General Assembly in the 1960s agree. "The speaker's agenda was the governor's agenda," says Ted Harrison of the University of North Carolina Center for Public Television, who came to Raleigh in 1968 to cover politics for WFMY-TV in Greensboro. Russell Clay, who began covering the Assembly in 1959 and who ended his legislative career as a speechwriter for Speaker Liston Ramsey in 1989, says the speakers of the 1950s "didn't have an agenda to the extent that they do now. They were just there to preside."

That was also the case in the sessions of 1945 and 1947, recalls Rep. Vernon James (D-Pasquotank), who served two terms in the legislature in the 1940s, then returned in 1973. The speaker's agenda, he says, "was the governor's agenda."

Past speakers agree. Britt lists the four speakers he served under as a representative: Addison Hewlett in 1959, Joe Hunt in 1961, Cliff Blue in 1963, and Pat Taylor in 1965. Of each, he says the same thing. "If he had an agenda, I didn't know

### ***Current Speaker Dan Blue presides over the House in 1993.***



N.C. Division of Archives and History

**Table 1. Speakers of the North Carolina  
House of Representatives,  
1961–Present**

Years Served	Representative	County
1961.....	Joseph M. Hunt Jr. ....	Guilford
1963.....	H. Clifton Blue .....	Moore
1965 and 1966 special session .....	H. Patrick Taylor Jr. ....	Anson
1967.....	David M. Britt .....	Robeson
1969.....	Earl W. Vaughn .....	Rockingham
1971.....	Philip P. Godwin .....	Gates
1973–1974*.....	James E. Ramsey .....	Person
1975–1976.....	James C. Green .....	Bladen
1977–1980.....	Carl J. Stewart Jr. ....	Gaston
1981–1988.....	Liston B. Ramsey .....	Madison
1989–1990.....	Josephus L. Mavretic .....	Edgecombe
1991–Present <sup>9/14</sup> .....	Daniel T. Blue Jr. ....	Wake
1995–1998	Harold Brubaker	
1999–	Jim Black	

\* In 1974, the legislature began meeting annually, rather than every other year, adding a short session in even-numbered years at which the primary business would be to fine-tune the biennial budget.

what it was.” Taylor, he says, was an exception to some extent in that he sought to modernize the state’s court system.

Yet even Taylor professes not to have had an agenda, and says that was typical of speakers of his day. “As speaker, I made an effort to promote the governor’s program,” he says.

Taylor says the speaker’s job was to make committee appointments and assign bills to those committees in a way that would assure that legislation got a fair hearing—not to exercise power or pursue an agenda. That, he says, was the job of the governor, not a state representative elected by district. “The governor is elected by the whole state,” says Taylor. “He should have right much influence when he proposes something.”

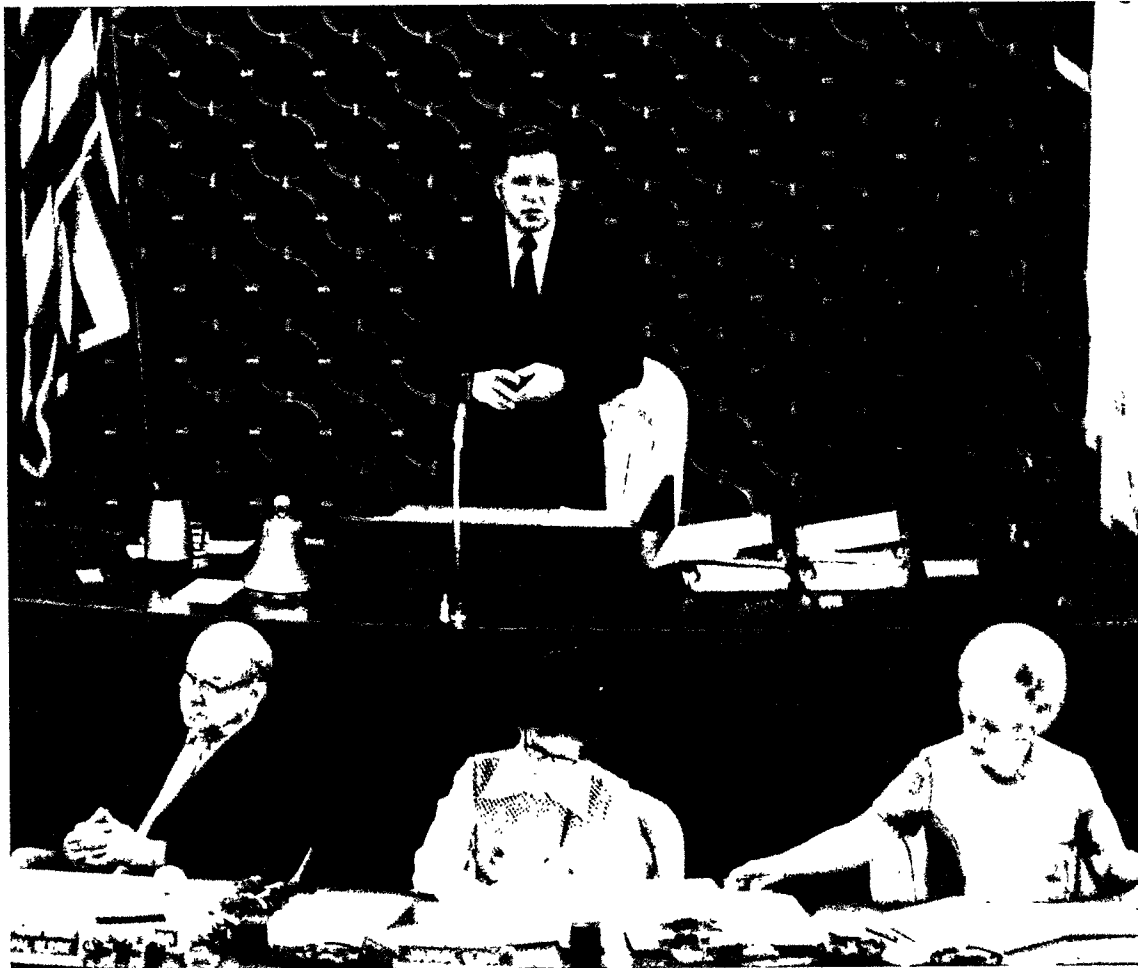
Blue has been open about his own agenda. In the 1993 session, for example, issues he supported included: raising standards for child care; improving child protective services; strengthening public education; providing increased funding for low-wealth public school districts; and reforming the

health care system to provide universal coverage for all North Carolina citizens.

Like speakers before him, Blue also worked the appropriations process effectively. He carved out \$4.2 million from the state capital budget for a health sciences building at North Carolina Central University in Durham, his undergraduate alma mater, and—taking care of his home county—set aside \$5 million in the state budget in case it was needed to secure a London route for Raleigh-Durham International Airport.

Looking ahead to 1994 and beyond, Blue’s chief concerns are crime and punishment, further work on obtaining a universal health plan for North Carolina citizens, economic development, government efficiency and effectiveness, and issues affecting children and families.

Blue scoffs at the notion that other speakers had no agenda. “I think some of them had something of an agenda,” he says. “They were among some of the chief policymakers of the state. They can claim that they did not have an agenda, but



N.C. Division of Archives and History

**Lt. Gov. Pat Taylor presiding over the Senate in 1971.  
Taylor was House Speaker in 1965-66.**

even if they were not proactive, you're going to have an agenda to react. They may not have been as tightly defined as some of my ideas, but if they didn't have an idea [of what they wanted to do in terms of policy], they shouldn't have run for office."

Whether they had a clearly stated agenda, other speakers certainly exerted their will through the office. For example, four-term House Speaker Liston Ramsey, a Madison County Democrat, used the power of the office to control the budget process, build the strength of the legislative branch versus the executive branch, and direct numerous multi-million dollar capital projects to western North Carolina. And with Republican Governor James G. Martin in office for two of Ramsey's four terms, the mountain populist had a clear agenda to *oppose* Martin's agenda.

## II. Other Institutional Changes in the Speaker's Office

**W**hile the office of the speaker has evolved toward a fully staffed office that enables an independent agenda, there also have been institutional changes that have helped the office consolidate power. Among these are succession (the ability of the speaker to seek more than one consecutive term), the evolution of the speaker's office to a full-time position, and, indirectly, the legislature's removal—or stripping—of certain powers from the lieutenant governor's office.

### *A. Serving Multiple Terms: the Most Important Institutional Change?*

The freedom to run for the speaker's office more than once often is cited as a way in which the

power of the speaker has grown. Since 1979, when Carl Stewart won a second term as speaker and broke a century-old tradition of one-term speakers, speakers have had the option of seeking to succeed themselves.<sup>3</sup> Stewart held the job for two terms, Liston Ramsey for four, and Mavretic for one. Blue is in his second term and leaning

toward seeking a third.

Taylor, in fact, calls this succession issue the most dramatic change in the power of the speaker since he held the office in 1965. And Taylor credits succession with breaking a long-standing tradition of alternating the speakership between the east and the west. "Of course it was an unwrit-

## *The Roots of the Speaker's Power*

**T**he Office of the Speaker of the N.C. House of Representatives, unlike that of the Lieutenant Governor, derives none of its powers from the state Constitution. The Constitution says only that, "The House of Representatives shall elect its Speaker and other officers."<sup>1</sup> Instead, most of the speaker's powers are rooted in the easily modified House Rules. State statutes also place the speaker on several boards and commissions and give the speaker authority to make appointments to dozens more. The speaker's powers and their origins are as follows:

### **A. Powers Derived from State Statutes**

1. The power to make outright or to recommend to the General Assembly 323 appointments to 120 boards and commissions in the executive branch. These powers are authorized under N.C.G.S. 120-121 and 120-123 and various other state statutes. (See Tables 4 and 5 for a complete listing of appointments to policy-making and advisory boards controlled by the speaker.)
2. The speaker serves as a member of:
  - The Legislative Research Commission (ex officio), N.C.G.S. 120-30.10(a);
  - The Legislative Services Commission, N.C.G.S. 120-31(a);
  - The Capital Planning Commission, N.C.G.S. 143B-374(a);
  - The Council on Interstate Cooperation, N.C.G.S. 143B-380(2);
  - The Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies (ex-officio), N.C.G.S. 143-533;
  - The Economic Development Board, N.C.G.S. 143B-434, and;
  - Health Planning Commission, N.C.G.S. 143-611.

### **B. Powers Derived from House Rules**

3. The power to preside over the House (1993-94 House Rule 6);
4. The power to control floor debate (1993-94 House Rule 7);
5. The power to decide points of order (1993-94 House Rule 9);
6. The power to vote or reserve the right to vote on legislation before the House (1993-94 House Rule 25);
7. The power to appoint committees and committee chairs (1993-94 House Rule 29);
8. The power to assign bills to committee (1993-94 House Rule 32).

#### **FOOTNOTE**

<sup>1</sup> Article II, Sec. 15 of the N.C. Constitution.



Karen Tan

**Former Speaker Liston Ramsey (1981–1988) hears out Rep. Howard Chapin (D-Beaufort) following Ramsey's defeat for a fifth term as House Speaker in January 1989.**

ten law, and there was never any clearly defined line of where the east ended and the west started," says Taylor.

Succession, he says, ended the tradition by giving Stewart, a westerner from Gastonia, a second term. Then Ramsey, a mountain populist from the far west, buried the tradition by winning a second, and then a third and a fourth term. "Everything disappeared with that of course," says Taylor.

Blue also says that the tradition of alternating the speaker's office between the east and the west now is a relic. "The speaker before me was from the east and I'm from the east and I've been elected twice," he says.

Hawk Johnson, a lobbyist who has followed the General Assembly since 1969, agrees with Taylor that succession resulted in a dramatic boost in the powers of the speaker. "The biggest change has been succession," he says. "It stopped the political parade through here every two years and kept new leadership from developing. The speaker has more power today, and he can utilize more power because in recent years, [a member] knew

the leadership would change. Now, [a member] doesn't know if the speaker is for today or forever, and legislators have to subvert their desires to those of the leadership."

Stewart says he didn't break the succession tradition to increase his power. He says it was a reaction to changes in state law and in the state constitution that threatened to weaken the speaker's office.

On November 8, 1977, North Carolina voters agreed to a constitutional amendment that allows the governor and lieutenant governor to succeed themselves for a second term.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the lieutenant governor's job had been made full-time under then Lt. Gov. Jim Hunt in 1973.

Representatives felt threatened in two ways. First, they feared that the traditional balance of power between the House and the Senate would be dissolved and the Senate would have an advantage. The lieutenant governor, who at that time appointed committees and routed bills to those committees, would be able to put a leadership team in place for up to eight years.<sup>5</sup> Such permanency in politics leads to strength. The House, on

the other hand, would see its leadership change every two years. "We needed some balance over on the House side in terms of the respective influence of the presiding officer," Stewart says.

The second threat was to the legislature as a whole versus the executive branch. By allowing a governor to succeed himself, the voters had doubled some of the powers which a governor uses to influence legislators. The governor's ability to hire legislators and their friends—making them judges, utility commissioners, or transportation board members, for example—now potentially ran for eight years, not just four.<sup>6</sup> It was a huge bargaining chip to use with legislators.

Succession, says Stewart, allowed his two terms as speaker to "fit nicely into the gubernatorial term." He served four years with Hunt as governor and Jimmy Green as lieutenant governor. The extra term also fit nicely with Stewart's political plans. He stayed in the speaker's chair just long enough to challenge Green in the 1980 Democratic primary for lieutenant governor but, like a line of previous speakers (including Taylor and Joe Hunt, who served in 1961 and wanted to be governor), his ultimate political ambitions were never fulfilled. He lost.

That's not to say that the speaker's office can't be a launching pad to higher office. Nationally, 21 speakers have run for governor during the past 17 years. Five have been successful and four of those five have won a second term. (See "The Speaker's Office as a Political Stepping Stone?" page 30, for more on this topic.)

Still, among Southerners, only Tennessee Democrat Ned McWherter has made the direct

transition from the speaker's office to the governor's mansion. One difficulty is that the speaker is elected by district and is likely to have less name recognition than the lieutenant governor, who is elected statewide. But clearly, succession has helped raise the profile of the speaker's office in North Carolina. For the ambitious politician, the speaker's office may yet prove to be a direct path to the governor's mansion in North Carolina.

### ***B. The Speaker's Office Becomes a Full-Time Job***

Despite being elected by district, the office of speaker has the statewide responsibilities that come with directing a legislative chamber representative of the entire state and through which all legislation must pass. These responsibilities were enhanced with the evolution to a full-time position. This institutional change occurred during the tenure of Liston Ramsey, who succeeded Stewart. Ramsey had no ambitions beyond speaker and was ready to serve in the post indefinitely.<sup>7</sup> In his four terms, he probably brought more power to the office than it ever had before.

When Ramsey became speaker in 1981, House members were anxious to regain parity with the Senate. There was a sense that the House as an institution had fallen behind, despite Stewart's two activist terms. Roger Bone, now a lobbyist but then a representative, recalls a joint meeting of the House and Senate appropriations committees at which the budget was being considered. "Ed Holmes, who was our chairman of appropriations [in 1979-80], was standing at the podium saying that this was not the Senate's budget that was about to be approved, that the House had had some input. And nobody believed him."

Al Adams, a lobbyist now but co-chairman of House Appropriations in 1981, says Ramsey felt strongly when he took the speakership that "the House needed to be the equal of the Senate and that our members ought to be made to feel that they are part of the process."

Ramsey says, "I took the position, and still do, that there is no upper house. There's one house with 50 members and that's the Senate, and there are 120 state representatives, and we've earned that title." Members in both chambers serve two-year terms.

Ramsey set about finding inequities in resources available to the upper and lower houses and eliminating them. If the lieutenant governor's office had a certain number of staff positions,

—continued on page 32

***"I took the position, and still do, that there is no upper house. There's one house with 50 members and that's the Senate, and there are 120 state representatives, and we've earned that title."***

—FORMER SPEAKER LISTON RAMSEY  
(D-MADISON)