

Michigan COMMENTARY

Representative Richard A. Young: A Profile

by David L. Kimball, Senior Consultant for Public Policy

"There are a lot of days when you don't learn a damn thing here, but then there are days when you learn a lot." State Representative Richard Young (D-Dearborn Heights) cracks his trademark grin as he comments on nearly three decades of legislative life. Young recalls his first impression on arriving at the capitol in 1964: "If I can keep my mouth shut and my ears open, I'll really learn something here." Now sixty-five years old and a dean among Michigan lawmakers, Young's appetite for information and his penchant for plain speaking remain undiminished.

An avuncular man whose twinkling eyes take in facts and faces with the cool scrutiny of the federal revenue investigator he once was, Young is one of the three longest-serving Michigan House members. He and fellow Wayne County legislator John Bennett have served fourteen terms each, a record exceeded only by Dominic Jacobetti's nineteen-term tenure. Young serves as vice chair of the powerful House Appropriations Committee and is the odds-on favorite to succeed Jacobetti as chair. "I like Jake—and he's smarter than most people give him credit for," Young says. "When he retires, I'm in line," Young affirms, adding, "I don't bet on it either way, but I would like to have a chance at it."

Admitting that his moderate politics occasionally rankle colleagues in the Democratic caucus, Young is a fiercely independent spirit who has made it a point never to rely on his legislative salary. "You never know when this thing is going to come to an end," explaining his continuing interest in the tax practice he developed before assuming office. "For one thing, keeping it helped me be more independent; I didn't have to rely on any lobbying group for my money."

"I have always wanted to be independent," Young continues. "I didn't want to have to rely on a group. I enjoy being a Democrat, although I'm a conservative Democrat—I voted for Milliken the last time he ran, even though that's a traitorous thing to admit. I thought he was a very thoughtful person. I really think that the people who are in the middle are the ones that do a better job in government than the ones at the extremes."

Young's desire for independence has led him to keep his sights focused on his House seat. "I always said being a state representative was enough for me; I don't aspire to going on from here because there's too much baggage you have to take with you when you go. You have to get out and finance your campaign through solicitation, and I hate to ask people for money. You know," he confides, "I never had a fund-raiser until I had been in office twelve years, and then only because everybody else was having them and it seemed stupid on my part not to: Money you spend for politics is not deductible, so while others were raising this tax-free money through all these parties, here I was, working for mine and paying income tax on it. I decided then that I was just carrying this thing too far."

Young hypothesizes that this fiercely independent spirit as well as his interest in government grew out of the same childhood experiences. "When I was a kid, my dad and mother were poor. In 1932 they would have lost their home if Roosevelt hadn't come in with his homeowner's loan program. I can remember going down and standing around the federal building [in Detroit], waiting for my mother to get the paperwork to fill out the application so we could get our home remortgaged at a lower rate. I remember the fireside chats



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and all that. Roosevelt was almost like a god to my dad. So I always thought, 'When I grow up, I'm not going to be in the same position my mother and dad were in.' I decided that I was going to go to law school and at least know my way around."

Young began learning his way around with a degree in public administration from the University of Detroit and a law degree from Wayne State University. "I majored in public administration—a lot of political science courses along with accounting. I wanted to be able to get a job after I got out of school, and it's tough to get a job with just a political science degree." After six months with the City of Detroit auditor general's office, Young became a U.S. internal revenue agent. "I never thought of myself as an internal revenue agent—but the pay was better," he explains. "I liked working for the IRS; you meet people from all levels of society, and you really learn a lot. The bad thing is that nobody likes you."

The IRS job was followed by a stint at a private accounting firm. Then Young decided to open his own practice, and he also accepted a teaching position at the University of Detroit. "Pretty soon," Young recounts, "I started getting into local politics. I ran for precinct delegate and for Dearborn Heights Township treasurer; then we converted our township to a city." In 1964 Young was city treasurer, a part-time job, when he launched his first legislative campaign. "I could have run for the Senate or the House, but I figured I was more likely to win the House than the Senate seat, because the Senate district covered three times the area [of the House district]."

After winning an eleven-way primary race, Young had an easy first victory, helped by the long coattails of Lyndon Johnson's landslide triumph over Barry Goldwater. ("If you were on the Democratic ticket, you just came in.") His next campaign was tougher because it was Zolton Ferency at the top of the Democratic ticket, challenging popular incumbent George Romney. "Ferency sometimes felt like a weight on our back," Young says in a joking reference to the reputation of the university professor and former state party chairman for being an outspoken maverick. "He always was quick with a witty retort—some of them went over, and some of them didn't—and Romney just kicked hell out of him. That was my closest race—I won by nine hundred votes—and statewide the Democrats lost seventeen seats. I said at the time, 'They'll never catch me like that again,' and I really tried to organize more."

As Young's political career progressed, his mentors were some of Michigan's best known political figures, including William Ryan, whose twenty-four years of service included five as House Speaker. "I always admired him," Young says. "A lot of times I'd say to myself, 'What would Bill Ryan do if he were in this predicament?'" Young also admired the legendary command of twelve-term veteran Taxation Committee chair, George Montgomery. "He was a character," Young reminisces. "He could sit in the Jack Tar Hotel and drink White Horse scotch until three in the morning. Then he'd start his committee meetings off at 8:00 a.m. with all these one-liners, and no one would know where he had come up with them!"

As Young's tenure lengthened, so did his reputation and influence, especially during the administration of Governor James Blanchard. Young counts his close relationship with the former governor among the most satisfying aspects of his long legislative career. "He'd call me in more often than anyone—especially after [former Speaker] Gary Owen left. I didn't want to see [Blanchard] go," Young muses about the outcome of the 1990 election, adding, "He told me that he wanted to win, but he didn't look forward to the tough job of being governor—maybe the electorate sensed that too. There's a lot of similarity between Blanchard and Engler: they're both confrontationalists—they like to scrap it up."

Of Governor Engler, a former House colleague, Young says, "I think he's smart; I think he'll change. As he comes toward the center, people on the right are going to get upset with him, but I would expect to see him start moving toward the center pretty soon."

With characteristic candor, Young continues, "When Engler first came in up here he didn't really impress me—although I was impressed by the fact that he had knocked off [incumbent Representative] Russ Strange. He stayed here a while, and then—bang—he knocked off [former Senator John] Toepp. By then I thought, holy cow, I've underrated this guy!"

"So far he's been a unique governor," Young asserts, pausing in an effort to recall a time of comparable partisan and public contention. "Maybe when Blanchard raised the income tax it was about this bad. That's the only time that I can remember the kind of furor that's occurred. Under Milliken it didn't happen, and I was here with Romney and it didn't happen. It's easy to be a Monday morning quarterback, but if Engler had said, for example, 'We're not going to have general assistance during the summer months,' that would have been some acknowledgement on his part that life becomes a little treacherous in the wintertime in Michigan."

Asked to pose his own solutions to the state's fiscal straits, Young barely hesitates before responding. "I think it's easier to cut than it is to be a leader and say, 'Maybe we need some new revenues.' That doesn't mean we need to raise the income tax or the sales tax, but there are a lot of things that could be patched up."

"I think there's a real possibility for an admission tax—it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, and I think we could raise a lot of money if we just added four percent onto admissions. I think if the general public was convinced that we weren't going to misuse the funds, they would go along with us."

"The art of government, I really think," he says with a grin, "is to pluck the goose so it doesn't squawk." To Young that means regularly identifying new programs and revenue sources, as well as phasing out the least effective ones. "I mean there are programs that should go—they've served beyond their time. Engler has been doing pretty well in identifying some of those, I'd say."

Asked to list his most rewarding accomplishments, he leads off with, "Just being in the legislature for twenty-eight years has been great." Then he recounts an early assignment as a Judiciary Committee conferee on legislation to replace the justice of the peace system with the state's district court system. "Legislatively, that's probably my greatest achievement. Locally, it would be merging three school districts as well as getting projects for my district. I got a watering system financed for the local municipal golf course that has doubled their revenue and helped the economy of the whole area. I've also been UM/Dearborn's man in the legislature—they've been funded at the highest level of any school in the state for the past two years."

If his friend and colleague Representative Jacobetti should someday retire, what would the Appropriations Committee be like chaired by Dick Young? "There are some things I'd do differently: I'd set deadlines, for one thing, so that the more important bills would have time to surface. And I'd like all members of the committee to know what's in the bills; I don't think they now do. Sometimes I think we could use the auditor general more; in some states the auditor general assists the legislature in writing bills. You have to keep thinking of ways you might save some dough around this place."

The man who fondly recalls his own mentors is now in a position to give counsel regularly to others. What kind of advice does he offer? "Well, generally, to be a good listener. You don't learn by talking. If you listen carefully, you just about always know what to do. There's a right way and a wrong way; if you just try to do the right thing, the politics takes care of itself. At least that's the way I try to approach it. I sit there and do a lot of listening, and I take notes, and then I try to figure out the most logical thing to do. Then I do it."

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