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## **Michigan COMMENTARY**

### **Five Michigan Political Leaders: Evolving Roles and Early Tests**

by Craig Ruff

Political leadership is tested most in periods of change. Political leaders know that events, public opinion, leadership dynamics, and the times affect their roles and actions and test their flexibility and adaptability. The five men who lead Michigan's legislative and executive branches of government are undergoing metamorphoses in response to the political change wrought by voters last fall. They are: John Engler (governor), Dick Posthumus (Senate majority leader), Art Miller (Senate minority leader), Lew Dodak (Speaker of the House), and Paul Hillegonds (House minority leader).

Change itself is neither inherently good nor bad, but its consequences may be positive or negative. The consequences of the 1990 elections are being felt just now not only by the general public but by the people invested with political leadership. This *Commentary* examines the styles of the five leaders, their roles, their interaction, and what the future may bring them.

#### **GOVERNOR JOHN ENGLER**

John Engler won the bully pulpit and political brass ring of Michigan—the governorship. Twenty years a legislator, a retailer in both chambers of his Republican principles, and a skillful strategist and political organizer, Engler came to the governorship with more battle-tested legislative savvy than any predecessor. Engler's tactical mettle resembles Lyndon Baines Johnson's. LBJ was, and Engler is, the consummate maneuverer/insider/strategist, and he has shown considerable brinkmanship in the current budget crisis.

John Engler is not timid. He never has been, even when his arsenal—namely Republican control only of the Senate—was paltry. Now his arsenal bristles: His party controls two—the governorship and the Senate—of the state's three political fulcra; he commands daily media attention; he alone can claim a statewide mandate. Like LBJ, Engler will buttonhole legislative friend and enemy alike. He will bully. He will threaten dire consequences if he does not get what he wants. He will reward. He knows the “hot buttons” and local politics of most every legislator. Like the godfather, he will make offers they cannot refuse. Like the gambler, he instinctively knows “when to hold and when to fold.”

Let us expand on the merchandising metaphor. If left to his retailing skills, Governor Engler would ring up sales on items of his legislative agenda by the pocketful. What is so interesting about his behavior in the current budget crisis is that he largely is leaving the retailing to his budget director, Patti Woodworth, and others; he is concentrating on wholesaling his program of budget and property tax cuts to the general public. Although mass marketing is not thought to be his strong suit, Engler is going over the heads of Democratic legislators to the public. He is polarizing the partisan schism. Like President Reagan, he is rallying the taxpayers against the “problem of government” and against the “status quo Democrats.” He hopes to win, as Reagan did, conservative Democratic votes for his budget by the pressure legislators' tax-hating constituents will place on them.

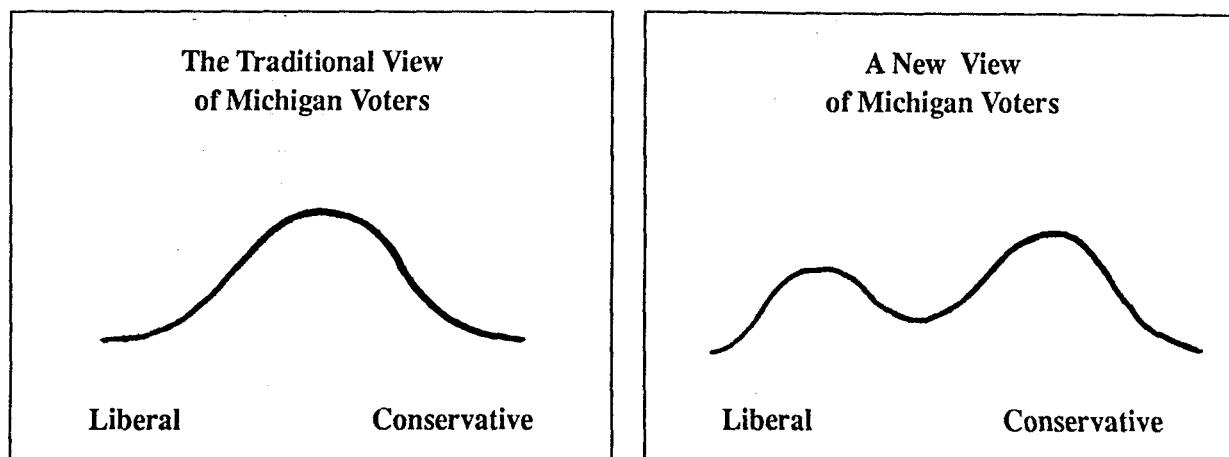


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If he wins the wholesaling contest with the Democrats, if he persuades enough of the public that taxpayer interests come ahead of beneficiary interests, then Engler moves into the retailing stage of the budget fight almost invincible: His metier at one-on-one persuasion will clinch victory. At present, Engler is winning the wholesaling war. The governor is proving adept at painting the big picture and persuading the public that his vision and philosophy are right for the time.

Philosophy always has been secondary to pragmatism in Engler's political life. It surprises many that he is coming across as a true-believing conservative, a reincarnation of Reagan. Conventional wisdom holds that pragmatic politicians, to pick up support from the greatest number of voters, must hew to the political center. Our new colleague at PSC, former state Senator Bill Sederburg, offers a view that may help explain Engler's tough conservatism. Sederburg believes Engler's sharp tilt to the right reflects an accurate reading of newly polarized ideology among Michigan voters. (Look for a forthcoming *Commentary* by Sederburg on this topic, in which he speculates whether this change is permanent.) Hewing to the political center makes sense when the distribution of voter philosophy resembles a bell curve (shown below left). Adhering to a more strident ideological doctrine makes sense when if ideologies are more polarized (shown below right).



The current distribution of voter sentiment in Michigan is camel shaped, and there are more conservatives than liberals. Engler realizes that he gains not from heading to the center, but from forcing people to choose between a liberal Democratic philosophy and a conservative Republican one. If Engler can paint Democratic legislators *en masse* as liberals, as he did Governor Blanchard in the 1990 campaign, he wins again. Engler's strategy in the budget crisis is to draw the ideological line and make the public decide whether its best interests lie in a taxpayer-sheltered conservative policy or a beneficiary-protected liberal policy. If he can compel the public to join one camp or the other, he may move conservative Democrats in the legislature his way.

The divisiveness in such a strategy is unique in modern Michigan politics. Governors Blanchard, Milliken, Romney, Swainson, and Williams all dodged risk by eschewing ideological schisms and staying in the center and mainstream of political thought. Each was governor when his party's fortunes generally were lower than his own personal appeal. Survival instincts told each to downgrade his partisanship and cloak his administration in centrist garb. Engler appears to believe that his party's fortunes and the tide of conservative thought have a stronger pull than his own personal appeal, and that his staying power may depend on cleaving to a shriller and sharper conservative tone.

I believe that John Engler's rhetorical conservatism is less inherent than deliberate. I suggest he has made a conscious, hard-headed, and practical decision to polarize the public, force voters toward Republican conservatism, and strengthen his own hold on the electorate.

Columnist Bob Talbert, in the *Detroit Free Press* in mid-February, lambasted the governor for being insensitive to people. This was the harshest attack thus far on Engler's budget-cutting moves, and the Talbert perspective should concern the governor and his staff. This depiction of a compassionless chief executive could be echoed in other media coverage, Democratic attacks, and legislative debates. If Republicans in Lansing are nervous about anything just now, it is this: that John Engler, because of his reputation and his early actions as governor, will become indelibly labelled as callous.

Reagan, like Engler, led a taxpayers' rebellion, but Reagan never came across to the general public as mean-spirited or uncaring. To a great many people, Reagan was a successful and genial, if not beloved, leader. Engler must guard against the public perception that although as an administrator his fiscal policies are successful, as an individual he lacks compassion. Unless he takes care in articulating policy and demonstrates empathy for the people his policies are affecting, Engler may end his first year in office as a productive but unpopular governor. Most Michigan governors have been perceived by voters as men who, right or wrong, had their hearts in the right place. Engler is in danger of being thought of as having his in the wrong place.

#### SENATOR DICK POSTHUMUS

Dick Posthumus succeeded Engler as Senate majority leader. He worked hard in 1990 (1) to line up Republican caucus members to elect him leader and (2) to help the GOP capture the twenty seats necessary to preserve its Senate majority.

The new majority leader is having trouble finding his niche. Had Blanchard won, Posthumus simply would have assumed the role of his predecessor, John Engler: the titular head of the state GOP and the only Republican among the triumvirate (governor, House Speaker, and Senate majority leader). He would have become the opposition leader in Michigan.

Thrilled as he is to have a Republican governor at his side, Posthumus must now balance the roles of courier for his king and leader of his caucus. On some issues the proper role is clear. In advising and consenting on gubernatorial appointments Posthumus must accede to the governor's choices; of course, he and other Republican legislators will help recruit and influence those selections. On some policy questions, such as property tax cuts, the same holds true: Posthumus will be Engler's messenger and adherent. On other policy matters, such as telecommunications regulation, Engler may be somewhat deferential to Posthumus's expertise or to that of other Senate Republicans. Issues on which the Senate Republican caucus is divided will be more vexing. In these early days of the Engler administration, contentiousness within Republican ranks has not yet surfaced. It will, however. Handling of points of difference will test Posthumus far more than carrying Engler's water.

The caucus may not stay united. The Republican legislators' honeymoon with their new governor may not last forever. As Engler purposefully cleaves people into ideological camps, the less hardline conservatives in the Senate caucus like Vern Ehlers, Jon Cisky, Dave Honigman, Joe Schwarz, and Dan DeGrow may

become uncomfortable and occasionally part company with him. (Ideology aside, the state Senate never has been a chamber noted for a "one-for-all, all-for-one" camaraderie. Its leaders regularly are eaten alive by the members' individualism.) Although Posthumus is well-liked, (better than Engler was when he was Senate leader), friendship will help him only so much. He also needs respect. Respect in the legislature is earned, in part, from the judicious use of toughness, fearlessness, and even intimidation.

Another problem facing Posthumus is whether Governor Engler will try to continue to run the Senate. After all, Engler led Republicans to majority status, effectively unified them in numerous battles against Blanchard, and enjoys unusual rapport with all Senate Republicans, many of whom he recruited as candidates for their office.

Posthumus wants to follow Engler into the governorship. He knows it will not be easy, and he is not sure when his chance will come. Whenever, he must win a statewide Republican primary, which will be easier with Engler's blessing. To get it, he must be loyal and attentive. But he also must build his own identity, issues, and following. George Bush succeeded at the task, but political history is littered with those who did not: Jim Brickley, Bob Dole, Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, and others.

In politics, timing is everything. When should Posthumus emerge from Engler's shadow? Should he posture himself as a running mate in 1994, chancing that Engler will seek reelection but Lieutenant Governor Binsfeld will not? Or should he take a higher profile between now and then, chancing instead that Engler will decide to run for U.S. Senator Riegle's seat in 1994? Furthermore, can he find an issue that gives him an identity apart from, but not at variance with, his leader? Can he steal headlines from the governor without ruining relations with him?

Thus far, Posthumus has held the Senate Republican caucus together on the budget. He has not yet had the chance to prove his negotiating skills with Speaker Dodak or to begin to shape his future.

## SENATOR ART MILLER

Art Miller has been reelected Senate Democratic (minority) leader by his caucus. This post is somewhat more important and visible now with a Republican, rather than Democratic, governor. Miller and House Speaker Dodak lead the party of opposition. Miller's hand may be strengthened because of the tenuous 20-18 Republican majority and the number of moderate Republican senators who will find it a strain to adhere to a strict conservative dogma.

Miller worked hard to try to win a Democratic Senate majority in 1990. Although he had to compete daily with Blanchard and the Blanchard-controlled State Democratic Party organization for money and resources, was denied competitive staff levels and other Senate resources by Majority Leader Engler, and suffered bad luck in Mitch Irwin's decision to retire at the eleventh hour, Miller nonetheless guided Senate Democrats to their best showing in total popular vote since 1978 and, in several districts, to within a few thousand votes of gaining the majority.

Miller, like Posthumus, gets along by getting along. People like him. Life under Blanchard was not terribly difficult because Engler's solid hold on Senate Republicans gave the minority leader little opportunity to make a major difference on final votes. The negotiating and wheeling and dealing were conducted among

Engler, Dodak, and Blanchard. Miller and his Republican counterpart in the House, Minority Leader Paul Hillegonds, were relegated to minor roles at the negotiating table.

Because Posthumus does not yet have the iron hold over the Senate that Engler developed, and because of the unease of moderate Republicans, Miller has an opportunity to forge an occasional centrist majority; not on every vote, but on some.

Standing in Miller's way is his Democratic caucus. It is deeply divided ideologically and personally. Gil DiNello is one of the most conservative senators of either party. Don Koivisto is as conservative as many Republicans. At the other end of the spectrum, Lana Pollack and Virgil Smith rarely cast anything but liberal votes. As an example of the dissention within, some of the caucus follow the UAW leadership; others despise it. Several Democrats, like John Cherry and Debbie Stabenow, will work hard to negotiate compromises with majority Republicans. Others, like John Kelly and Jack Faxon, revel in being crusaders and iconoclasts. Molding a consensus, even occasionally, among this throng tests anyone's mettle.

Of the four legislative leaders, Miller is regarded by some as having the least chance of making a big difference in policy setting. I differ. I suggest that by the end of the 1991-92 legislative session, Art Miller might, just might, become a player in, not an afterthought of, the privy council of state government. If his caucus members seize the opportunity to frame new policy directions, as Hillegonds's House Republicans did in the last few years, the Senate Democrats could become power brokers.

Thus far, Miller has maintained his relatively quiet and guarded style. He has allowed the attention to focus on the battle between Engler and Dodak. He is shrewdly letting the Goliaths—the governor and the leader of House Democrats—battle it out. But if he can enter the budget fray at the right time with compromises, Miller could become the man of the hour in the 1991 budget crisis.

## REPRESENTATIVE LEW DODAK

When Lew Dodak became Speaker of the House, he assumed the roles of titular head of, chief spokesman for, and highest ranking elected official in the state Democratic Party. Not a bad way to start one's year. Dodak is unquestionably the most even-tempered, congenial Speaker in twenty years—since Bill Ryan or Bob Waldron. There is little fury or flash in Dodak's style.

The questions being asked about Dodak are whether he can become tough enough to match Engler's steel and whether he effectively compete with the governor on the public stage, in legislative battles of wit, in tenacity, and in brinkmanship. Of the four legislative leaders, Dodak faces the most challenging metamorphosis. Because of the match being played out today on the budget, his fortunes—including his tenure as Speaker and his prospects for running for governor down the road—will be decided within the next ninety days.

When Gary Owen, the former Speaker, got mad, he set the whole capitol on edge. Owen had no compunction about telling Blanchard off or getting nose-to-nose with Engler. If any House member, Democrat or Republican, got out of line, Owen took him/her to the woodshed. Owen's style was autocratic, dictatorial, often mean-spirited, self-centered, and effective. Even when he lost a battle, people came away thinking he had won.

Lew Dodak is not Gary Owen. Dodak's style is conciliatory; his aim is consensus. Dodak delegates responsibility down to his committee chairs. As a manager, he is an "empoweror," not an emperor. The House, however, is accustomed to the latter, such as Gary Owen and Bobby Crim before him. Most House Democrats found Dodak's gentler, softer style refreshing and invigorating when Blanchard was governor. But now that they see themselves as the last bastion against Engler Republicanism, many yearn for a more strident leadership style and more discipline in the caucus.

House Democratic unity is slippery and fragile. More conservative and establishmentarian representatives like Mike Griffin, Dick Young, and Pat Gagliardi prosper in behind-the-scenes negotiations. Liberals like Dave Hollister, Lynn Jondahl, Perry Bullard, and Maxine Berman relish the exposure Engler has given them; they enjoy the media attention and they revel in being "the opposition." Although they often seethed under Blanchard's mainstream style, they only hesitatingly and in rare instances attacked their party's governor. With Engler, they can come out with guns blazing.

How Dodak chooses to do battle with Engler over the budget will tell us who dominates the House Democratic caucus—the establishment or the liberal activists. The Speaker is walking a tightrope, and a misstep will affect not just party unity, but his own hold on the caucus. If he negotiates with Engler and too much downsizing of state government is the result, the liberal noisemakers may abandon him. If this happens, his status as titular head of the state's Democrats will be weakened, and he quite possibly will have sacrificed his prospects in a gubernatorial Democratic primary. On the other hand, if he leads the Engler bashing, the liberals will be delighted, but his more conservative peers may abandon him and join Republicans in passing an Engler-like budget. If this happens, he could be painted as a liberal obstructionist to a conservative mandate and possibly have sacrificed statewide vote-getting appeal in a gubernatorial general election. At present, Dodak is electing to avoid either stance; he is not forcing negotiations and he is not caterwauling. His caution does not please either camp.

Like Posthumus, Dodak's hold on his chamber stems in large part from his affability. He is nice. Everyone likes him. But unlike Posthumus, who may be able to survive on affability in these early days of the Engler regime, Dodak must earn respect and earn it fast. This will necessitate placing some of his personal capital at risk, grabbing the policy reins from his committee chairs and centralizing caucus power, and becoming the tough, public, and successful upholder of Democratic policies against the new governor. It is not easy both to be liked and be feared.

To succeed as Speaker and stay alive as a gubernatorial prospect, Dodak must voice the rallying cry for state Democrats. He must command media attention and master speaking in TV-oriented sound bites. He must develop attractive alternatives to the administration's agenda. He must clearly and crisply define the wrong-headedness of Engler's proposals without coming across as blocking voter-mandated change. He must defend Democratic-supported constituent services, such as the general assistance welfare program, without appearing to be an apologist for the status quo. He must find ways to give Engler much of what he wants without appearing to roll over for the new governor. Nobody in Lansing is being watched more closely by those in the know than Speaker Dodak. Every day, people measure and test his leadership and public relations skills. The verdict still is out.

## REPRESENTATIVE PAUL HILLEGONDS

Paul Hillegonds was reinstalled as House minority leader, but he has lost visibility as a result of Engler's win. Under Blanchard he was the second most prominent state Republican; now he is in third place, after the new governor and Posthumus.

During Blanchard's tenure, House Republicans, like their minority Democratic counterparts in the Senate, largely were ignored in the negotiations on critical issues. But for all their neglect in the last few years, House Republicans put the other three caucuses to shame in examining public policy. Their task forces on health care, child care, and a host of other issues produced first-rate documents and practical recommendations. Much of the intellectual leadership of state government in recent years has come out of this minority. It enjoyed approbation from editorial writers and the capitol press corps, and Hillegonds consistently was the most highly praised of the legislative leaders. He likely both was embarrassed and proud when Blanchard, after the election, said that had Hillegonds been the likely Republican nominee for governor, he [Blanchard] might not have sought reelection.

The caucus over which Paul Hillegonds presides is more unified than the other three. His personal tolerance, respect, and pragmatism are mirrored, by and large, by his caucus. He is not an egotist; his style has been to bring out the best in most members and to maintain relative harmony.

There are conservative ideologues among House Republicans—people like David Jaye, Margaret O'Connor, and Tim Walberg. Under Blanchard's regime they enjoyed their opposition status and they adhered puritanically to their conservative principles. Under Governor Engler, they are jubilant about the message of tax and spending cuts. They never have cared to negotiate philosophy or pork barrel with House Democrats and they have no intention of starting now.

The House Republicans feeling squeezed now are the conciliators, such as Shirley Johnson, Ralph Ostling, Don Van Singel, and Ken Sikkema. In the past they practiced the fine art of winning what appropriations and legislative support they could from Democratic chieftains. Although they certainly enjoy having a Republican governor, Engler's "line-in-the-sand" strategies have put them in an uncomfortable position. If they curry his favor by standing with him, they could jeopardize their relationships with their Democratic friends; if they support negotiation and compromise as the way to bust the budgetary gridlock, they risk their governor's wrath.

To date, House Republican unity has been unimpeachable. One of the wild cards in the budget and tax politics is the question of whether it can be sustained. It will depend largely on Paul Hillegonds's deftness.

Thus far, Hillegonds has accepted the fact that Dodak and Engler share center stage. Yet if deadlocks on the budget and property tax cuts persist, and if Art Miller or Dick Posthumus is unable to posit and structure a compromise, Paul Hillegonds may have to assume the role of intermediary. Doing so while remaining loyal to his governor will be no mean feat. But as leader of the most unified of the four legislative caucuses, as a person highly respected by Engler (had Engler wanted a male running mate, Hillegonds likely would have been chosen), and as one who enjoys a cordial relationship with many Democrats, Hillegonds may be the best person to broker settlements on such key issues as the budget.

Like Posthumus, Paul Hillegonds has the potential and desire to be governor, to succeed Engler. His office, that of House minority leader, places him behind Senator Posthumus in the GOP pecking order, but Hillegonds's rapport with the media and his caucus's policy leadership give him competitive stature. It also is possible that in 1992 the elections will give the Republicans a majority in the House, making Hillegonds the Speaker and giving him equal status with Posthumus.

## REAPPORTIONMENT

The fight ahead over reapportionment, probably this fall, will make the partisan contentiousness and test of leadership styles and effectiveness over the budget and property tax cuts look almost pale by comparison. The manner in which the budget and tax issues are decided—the intensity of partisan rancor and the interpersonal leadership skills and dynamics of these five political leaders—is prelude to the reapportionment process. The stakes are great for the future of individual members of the legislature (and the Congress—based on the census, Michigan must lose two seats), and no commentary on the evolving roles of the governor and the legislative quadrant is complete without mention of redistricting.

Hillegonds's hope for a Republican House majority in 1992, the first since 1968, will depend partly on how strong the Republicans run overall. Except for state educational posts, the office of president/vice president will be the only statewide partisan race on the ballot in 1992, and if Bush wins Michigan handily the coattails could be long. GOP fortunes in the House also will rest partly with the decennial remapping of districts. As many as twelve seats could change hands simply because of reapportionment. That is sufficient to dethrone the Democrats in the House. House Republicans, however, worry that Engler and Posthumus will cut a reapportionment deal with Dodak that will give the GOP a lock on the Senate and eliminate two Democratic congressional seats in exchange for a redistricting of the state House that favors Democrats.

## LOOKING AHEAD

The gubernatorial-legislative tensions over the current budget cuts are minor compared to what will grow out of the next round. If the governor wins acceptance of a twenty percent property tax cut, the money to pay for it will have to come from budget reductions at least equal to those now being negotiated.

The current round is causing problems for all legislators in some way, but the biggest heat is being felt by the twenty or thirty who have the most welfare recipients, major cultural institutions, foster care home owners, and other affected constituencies in their districts. The next wave of budget reductions could close parks, further reduce the number of secretary of state offices, and shut down more mental health programs and facilities; many more legislators, Republican and Democrat alike, will be faced with loud and angry constituents.

To date, the budget ax has not fallen hard in many outstate areas, but when it does, constituents of Republican legislators will be less eager to buy the concept of a downsized state government. When policy (philosophy) and politics (looking after local interests) collide, it is safest to assume that politics will prevail. Republicans in the legislature will find it increasingly difficult to serve their both ideological leader, Governor Engler, *and* their voters and districts. Keeping GOP legislative unity may become Engler's greatest spring and summer challenge.



## CONCLUSION

The governor always will have the upper hand in state politics. He alone holds the bully pulpit, the privilege of claiming a statewide mandate, and the opportunity to set the policy and political agenda via the media. He alone proposes; the legislature disposes. As an agent for change, John Engler has come out of the chute faster and more decisively than any new governor in recent history.

Against the wave of "Engleromics" stands one person (Lew Dodak) and one caucus (the House Democrats). All political eyes are trained on the Speaker. Keeping his caucus intact, enticing the media to perceive and treat him as the opposition leader, and exhibiting an ability to play and win hard-ball politics are no small challenges.

Posthumus, Miller, and Hillegonds have a certain luxury: They may be bystanders in the Engler-Dodak duel. But if the budget wars take state government and essential state services to the cliff, any one of them may become the hero by emerging as the catalyst for compromise.

For this government—with its divided partisan control—to work, each of the five leaders must play a different role. Each must be strong, a good manager of his caucus or his administration's resources. In addition, each must allow the *others* the freedom to lead; indeed, each must *nurture* the development of the others' role. John Engler mastered this stratagem while in the Senate, giving the legitimacy of power not only to his Republican committee chairs, but to Senate minority Democrats, Speaker Dodak, and Governor Blanchard as well. Everyone benefited because discipline could be exercised in the various caucuses.

Michigan state government has had united political control—that is, the governorship and both legislative chambers dominated by a single party—in only five of the past forty-two years. We have ample experience in making bipartisan government work. It is not clean and precise. It is cumbersome. It is inefficient and slow. Gridlock is a way of life and patience essential, but it *can* be made to work. The extent will be determined by how today's five state political leaders play their evolving roles.

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