



Michigan COMMENTARY

The Politics of 1993: Renaissance of Action

by Craig Ruff

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This looks to be a heady year for federal and state lawmaking. The president and the U.S. Congress have not looked so spirited and eager to tackle problems (the deficit, health care affordability, and political reform) since 1983, when Ronald Reagan launched his crusade against a half-century of New Deal politics. Likewise in Lansing, a chief executive and 148 legislators are attacking ancient, heretofore unsolvable problems, including overreliance on the property tax, campaign finance, and medical liability costs. What's up?

THE SCOURGE OF DIVIDED GOVERNMENT

If 1993 plays out as a year of action in the two capitols, the source of the vigor must be traced to the November 1992 elections and the voters' decision (probably unconscious) to restore accountability to the political parties. Four months ago, voters put the Democrats in charge of Washington, D.C., and, for all intents and purposes, the Republicans in charge of Lansing. So far, I like what I see in both capitols: a spirit of initiative and momentum toward action.

Dividing governmental control between the political parties has been this century's primary modification to American democracy. It is an experiment that has failed. Policy has been stuck in a tube so narrow that only the most well-lubricated and watered-down change is allowed to drip out. Clogged with special interest lobbyists, endless negotiations, and turf-defending partisanship, the policy funnel fairly well shut down the whole purpose of politics: to enact the will of the public.

Active governance does not always mean better law. We should rejoice, however, that we can hold someone accountable (Democrats in Washington or Republicans in Lansing) for the laws that are made. The scourge of our antiquated political institutions (three branches of government, divided houses of the legislature, and bedsheet ballots) is the hiding of accountability. We never know who is in charge.

Whatever their intentions, the voters have permitted a healthy partisanship to rule the roosts of Washington, D.C., and Lansing. Bless them!

REACHING BEYOND SPECIAL INTERESTS

Like Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton gives an overarching purpose to policy change. Like his successful predecessors, Clinton wholesales beautifully: He enunciates for the public a mission and purpose and stands above the quibbling over details. Clinton has yet to prove that he has the mastery of Johnson and Reagan in retailing his program to members of Congress, but he is off to a decent start.

Lacking the bully pulpit of the White House and the communication skills of the president, Governor Engler nonetheless has set and sold a mission for Michigan. The theme to the governor's music is goal-directed conservatism. As he did with his redesign of public assistance goals and programs (once considered mean-spirited and now a national, Clintonesque model), budget balancing without tax increases, and protecting the developmental side (education) of state spending, Governor Engler is convincing the public that high property taxes and medical liability and auto insurance costs discourage economic development.

For all the loftiness of mission, nitty-gritty details must be addressed. As Jerry Faverman likes to say, "What the big print giveth, the little print taketh away." Special interests revel in the details (negotiating

facts) of federal deficit reduction and state auto insurance, medical liability, and property tax reforms. The little pictures dominate. Legislative partisanship assumes many different hues. Discipline faces off against prerogative.

The executives are showing mettle, and the early signs indicate that legislators are too.

THE BOTHERSOME THINGS

The Washington fervor disappoints in several areas. The Clinton deficit reduction plan grossly understates the contributions to the deficit of bloated federal spending, boondoggles, and transfer payments. Washington, D.C., has never met a tax increase that it did not spend. History is on the side of those skeptics, including many Democrats, who argue that to balance the budget spending cuts must precede any federal tax increase.

Even fans of action worry that too much of too much (novelist Pat Conroy's description of New York City) is not a good thing. Clinton's zest to bring about both budget deficit reduction *and* national health care reform in a half-year may exhaust both the Congress and the public.

Another beef is with the health care reform effort. The "Billary" task force is coming across as a covert clique, the empanelling of 400 sequestered experts (whose names could not be revealed under its ground rules) to reach a verdict leading to a complete overhaul of American medicine. Health care reform is not military strategy to be molded in secrecy and understood, at most, by a chosen few. Besides, the experts (health care economists, congressional staffers, and government regulators) have not performed so well over the past 20 years that they should be entrusted with the fate of medicine.

The task force's dog-and-pony, listening-ear shows to come are no substitute for engaging the public—now—to work through the consequences of change. The public is not served when a group assembled to tackle the nation's most complex conundrum (delivering the best medical care in the world at a price General Motors can afford) willfully excludes itself from public involvement. Anyone who knows where the task force is heading isn't talking; anyone talking doesn't know. That is an absurdly self-destructive process, effete undertaken.

A HOUSE OF NEGOTIATION

While it is still early in the year, the entire Michigan House of Representatives is the front-runner to win the public service award for 1993. Shell-shocked by the House Fiscal Agency scandal, a 55-55 partisan deadlock, the specter of limited terms, a virtual house cleaning of committee leaders and assignments, and a new Democratic leader, the 110 representatives could have been forgiven a few months' rest and withdrawal. Instead, they have been energized. They are moving headlong toward opening up their financial records, weighing broad reforms in campaign finance and lobbying rules, accommodating shared power in committees and on the floor, molding consensus on auto insurance reform, and inventing novel property tax reduction options.

Adversity may operate as a confidence builder for the representatives. The state House of Representatives historically has been accustomed to and dependent on audaciously autocratic rule. When the chamber has had a relatively collegial leader like Lew Dodak, the common complaint was "He's not tough enough." The changes wrought by last fall's elections have given members confidence that collaboration and negotiation can produce constructive action.

Since, with term limits, no state representative's future in the House extends beyond 1998, a "let's go out in style" mentality may be settling in. Or maybe there are other reasons. Who cares, so long as the House continues to exert the kind of policy leadership, harmony, negotiating skill, policy innovation, and concern for the commonweal evidenced to date?

... AND IN THE OTHER CHAMBER

The year that delivered a House of harmony has also delivered a Senate of urgency. Nobody in town can remember a year in which a legislative chamber's leaders laid out *and then followed* a timetable of action. The Senate's Republican leadership in January laid out, week by week, the bills to be passed. This is not the piddling variety of legislation, but very substantive statutory changes, such as property tax reduction and auto insurance and medical liability reform. So far, they are right on schedule.

Senate Republicans, since gaining a majority in 1983, have been stymied in moving their policy agenda—first by Democratic Gov. James Blanchard and then a Democratic-controlled House. They have wasted no time this year in resurrecting and passing their agenda to a less-hostile north wing of the state capitol.

In their haste, Senate Republicans have trampled over minority Democrats. Some GOP proposals (e.g., property tax cuts) are slipping out of the chamber on the narrowest of margins. A public act is still a public act, whether the Senate musters 20 (a bare majority of all 38 senators) or 30 votes. The Republicans padded their margin of majority by winning both of Monday's special elections. The Bay City area district of former Democratic Senator and now-U.S. Congressman Jim Barcia fell to the GOP, which easily retained Republican Congressman Nick Smith's old Senate seat in the Jackson area. The Republicans control the Senate 22–16, their greatest margin since 1964.

CONCLUSION

In contrast to a decade of partisan stalemates in Washington, D.C., and Lansing, 1993 looms as a very active policy-making year. Outcomes such as higher federal taxes or lower property taxes will not be to everyone's liking, but at least government is showing that it can move and that policy can change.

Executive leadership in Washington, D.C., and Lansing is vigorous and hospitable to innovation. Both the president and the governor are communicating well the benefits, in the public interest, of the changes they seek.

The state legislature shows more grit than in any session in recent memory and appears intent to overcome the long-extant gridlock among narrow interests and strive to find the public purpose behind policy.

All in all, to date it has been a robust year.

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