



## Michigan COMMENTARY

### Senate Majority Leader John Engler: A Profile

by Bev Farrar

He grew up on a cattle breeding farm in Isabella County with a brother and four sisters and was one of 42 graduates from Beal City High School in 1966. Today, Senate Majority Leader John Engler (R-Mt. Pleasant) is widely thought to be the opposition's best hope to defeat Democrat James Blanchard in the 1990 race for the governor's office.

From the beginning of his political life, Engler has been a winner. His rural family background provided the impetus for involvement in public affairs—his father served on the local school board for twenty years, was active in agricultural organizations, and, in 1968, ran for the state legislature. Son John helped out with the campaign, and that endeavor exposed him to a process that has come to dominate his life.

"When I returned to Michigan State in the fall, I took a couple of elective courses in the political science world [Engler's major was agricultural economics] and ended up writing a paper for a Michigan government course two years later on how to defeat an incumbent," Engler recalls. The paper—written for an acquaintance who later declined to run—became the foundation for Engler's remarkable 162-vote triumph over incumbent Republican Representative Russell Strange in 1970.

Barely 22 on election day, Engler became the youngest person ever elected to the Michigan House (a distinction held previously by Strange), a masterstroke he repeated eight years later when he beat an incumbent senator in a Republican primary to become the youngest Michigan senator in history.

Now 40, Engler displays few attributes commonly connected with youth except his political energy and the prominent position a computer terminal holds on his desk. Rather, after spending nearly half his life in elected office, he is regarded as an extremely astute politician and a strategist skilled beyond his years.

His talents evoke admiration even among his foes but seldom generate the genuine warmth enjoyed by some public figures. Engler's style has inspired comparisons with that of Governor Blanchard, especially with respect to the strong partisan bent of both men. (Engler is quick to point out that he had been a state representative for four years before Blanchard was first elected to Congress. "I don't know whether he modeled himself after me or not," he deadpans.)

"I don't worry too much about style," Engler says. "I try to do what I was elected to do by my caucus and constituency." Blanchard's constituency, in contrast, is "all 9.2 million people of Michigan," Engler

stresses, "and one of his problems has been an excessive amount of partisanship. The inability to sit down and work with legislators in both parties has hampered his administration."

"Another way I look at it is that I am a leader of the Republicans in the legislature and, as such, we compete for the attention and the support of the people of Michigan. We're proud of what we stand for, and we want to sell our goals and educate people about what our commitment is. It's only through that process that you get accountability. And if there's anything lacking in politics today in my judgment, it's accountability," he says.

Extreme partisanship is both unusual and counterproductive, Engler insists. "Only a minority today in the legislature are interested in drawing sharp distinctions in what they stand for and what their opponents do not. It's by far the accepted practice to simply focus on points of common interest and sort of gloss over some of the real disputes that are here.

"The whole education fight is not a partisan fight. It's a political fight in that it's a fight over limited resources."

The all-too-lengthy fight over education reform has become a nightmare of public policy by default in which Engler has encountered as much difficulty as others in Lansing. A few schemes to remedy the problem, or parts of it, have come within a hairbreadth of fruition only to be scuttled by political difficulties or, as some have charged, political cowardice.

Engler says flatly that if the governor would announce his support for whatever plan the four legislative leaders can agree upon, a solution would be found within a week. "We [in the legislature] are much closer to a solution on this issue than the governor."

Education should be the number one priority in this state's budget, Engler says, a position it clearly does not hold today. "Education has paid the price for the expansion of other areas of state service. We've seen the education share of the state budget decline from 29 percent to 7 percent of the general fund in the current year. The decline has been offset in part by lottery revenues, but it was the expectation of the people of Michigan that lottery revenues would enhance education, not merely serve as another tax to free up general fund dollars to be spent elsewhere."

It is no wonder that the people are frustrated, Engler says, acknowledging the appeal of a proposed petition drive by former Oakland County Prosecutor Brooks Patterson to lower property taxes. "Brooks is responding to a real need. That's why it's troubling in this process [of debate on school financing] to constantly battle those who say property tax relief isn't important. I think it's driving the entire debate.

"If it's simply a question of putting more money into education, then we ought to reshape the budget priorities and do it that way. But I think it certainly includes the need to do something about property taxes."

Engler justifies the legislature's paralysis on the issue by blaming the two-thirds vote required for legislative amendment of the constitution. "We represent people who have very divergent views on this, yet we have to have a higher percentage of agreement to pass it than the public does." (A simple majority is needed for the voters to make a constitutional change.)

"That extra burden allows far too many people to insert themselves in the process. We end up with a potential for gridlock if we don't address the problem, and if we do address the problem, we end up raising the complexity to the point where the public would have a very difficult time understanding what is being proposed."

In a more perfect world, Engler would like to pass an education package that would address both the quality and the funding issues and also would provide greater choice to parents on where their children attend school. "It's a sanction that parents should have," he says.

Because every need that people identify cannot be funded, Engler believes the state must invest in those programs that have the potential to provide a payoff—programs that lead to economic growth down the road. "We can do more things and solve more problems if we have greater economic growth." Furthermore, he adds, "the economic challenges of our state can't be solved by a work force that doesn't have adequate reading, writing, and counting skills."

Engler continues to deal with Michigan's challenges by choice, not by necessity. As the principal architect of President Bush's Michigan successes, he has been made aware of Washington opportunities available to him but has chosen to avoid being asked. Such an approach seems to satisfy everyone—the administration's gratitude has been expressed without forcing its object into the awkward position of deflecting future invitations.

"Michigan has supplied two ambassadors to this administration," Engler says, "and has a long tradition of involvement with the Agency for International Development beginning with the early leadership of John Hannah." The work of such an agency would coincide with Engler's agricultural interests and expertise, he notes. His law degree opens additional possibilities, and he refuses to say "never" in connection with positions outside the elective sphere. (Had politics never seduced him into service, Engler suggests he likely would have ended up on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange in the commodities markets.)

Engler is clearly at home with his current responsibilities as a state senator and leader of the Senate Republicans. He has a firm belief in "the genius of self-governance—the idea that free men and women can make decisions about the kind of society they want to have," although he wishes more people would participate in the process and hold their officials accountable.

Engler's achievements during his tenure as majority leader afford him a measure of justifiable pride. He singles out as important contributions Public Act 101 of 1988, which sets up an early warning system for local government to recognize approaching financial crises, and the establishment of the Michigan Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, which monitors how government services are provided.

Engler also prides himself on his leadership roles in the income tax rollback of 1986 and in establishing a low- and moderate-income neighborhood housing revitalization program.

Not by coincidence do these achievements involve the **process** of government rather than the ideology. Even his conversational choice of words reveals a preference for the practical—for what is strategically doable over what is ideologically correct. The trait, among many others, makes him an effective leader of his party and a serious contender for statewide leadership.

Leadership is a subject frequently on Engler's reading list—which also encompasses most other subjects. A voracious reader who uses literature to relax as well as inform, Engler included in his reading for a recent week Winston Churchill's *The Last Lions, Vol. II*; *The Life of FDR*; and *The Power of Myth*, the subject of a recent PBS series. Although two of three choices involve political leaders, Engler says he is just as likely to read fiction. The previous week he finished *Bonfire of the Vanities*.

In 1966, when he was a high school senior, Engler took part in a program called County Government Days sponsored by the Michigan Sheriffs Association. The program was run by the Bentley Foundation, specifically by D. Hale Brake, who had served as a state senator, state treasurer, and delegate to the 1961-62 constitutional convention.

"Mr. Brake believed that young people had to become involved in local government," Engler recalls. "He emphasized the importance of public service, particularly at the local level."

Mr. Brake's teaching made a profound impression on the young Engler, who was subsequently chosen to participate in Operation Bentley, a two-and-a-half-week short course on government at Michigan State University.

"That did it," Engler says. The session kindled an interest already present and provided a role model for public service. Engler describes Brake as "an exceptional man of terrific integrity and great intelligence. He was a small town country lawyer who devoted blocks of time in his life to public service."

As a mentor, Mr. Brake has offered a distinguished example for Engler and one that he clearly keeps in mind as he moves from success to success in public life—youngest representative, youngest senator, majority leader. But the time eventually comes to leave the mentor behind—state treasurer is not a position to which Engler aspires.

*Bev Farrar is a freelance writer and editor. Ms. Farrar has been a columnist and feature writer for The Detroit News and other publications. She served as assistant press secretary to Governor William Milliken.*