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HK: SORTING THROUGH THE MEANING OF THE 8 WEEK SPEAKER MELODRAMA

Winners, losers and bad faith

After dutifully publishing every press release that came our way from self-styled grassroots groups, the *SREC* and Republican county parties calling for the House GOP caucus to vote in order to unify behind a speaker candidate, we expected to actually see at least a few congratulatory press releases.

I admit I was less than stunned not to find a single such statement since yesterday's Caucus meeting.

On December 21, **Warren Chisum** wrote his colleagues, "There are three Republican candidates for Speaker now, and the Republican caucus is the appropriate place for us to narrow the field to one candidate."

As recent as last weekend, Chisum was assuring members that all he wanted was a vote, that he expected Straus to win and he would then stand down.

Neither Chisum's statement nor his assurances are operative any longer. He defied the will of his caucus last night, gave lie to his previous assurances and threw his support to **Ken Paxton**.

It was increasingly clear over the last several weeks that no matter what his talents, Paxton could never be speaker. He and his team and his surrogates impugned the integrity of colleagues and promised to recruit primary opponents for "wrong" votes.

Most House Republicans have now written off Paxton's campaign quixotic effort as little more than the opening salvo in his 2012 campaign to run for Senator **Florence Shapiro's** or Congressman **Sam Johnson's** seat next election.

They are not amused that he was willing to throw the institution of the House or their own personal reputations under the bus for what more than one has called a cheap campaign trick. His insistence on taking the vote to the floor today will change little other than demonstrate his ambition at the expense of others.

Unlike Chisum, Paxton has never called a press conference to discuss his candidacy nor has he personally talked to many of the Republicans whose vote he sought. He has preferred to conduct his campaign through the outrage industry apparently calculating their support will be crucial in 2012.

Phil King told *QR* in the days after the election that he thought a caucus vote would calm the waters and kill the argument that Straus was an illegitimate Republican speaker. Individual members of the *SREC* told *QR* their resolution calling for a caucus vote was not anti-Straus.

None of that was apparently true. It was just a tactic to hardball decent Republican lawmakers.

Instead, the outrage industry spent two months smearing an honorable man who was drafted by his colleagues to return power in the House to its members. Straus was elected to preside over a tied House that had rejected a domineering, top down, take-no-prisoners management style of **Tom Craddick**

In an editorial published in today's *Austin American Statesman*, **Michael Quinn Sullivan** inadvertently explained the justification for the smears and what ultimately became a caricature of a Republican primary campaign.

Sullivan wrote, “Politics, even speaker politics, must not be about personalities but policy outcomes. Texas voters are demanding bold policy results based on common-sense, conservative principles.”

To be generous, Sullivan’s statement reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the Speaker’s role in the House.

Republicans chafed so badly under the last presiding officer operating under the “Sullivan principle” that his Republican chairmen tried to remove him from the Chair mid-session in 2007. The rebellion began as early as 2003 when Craddick turned the House over to “the owners box”, what became shorthand for *Texans for Lawsuit Reform*. Craddick violated House rules by giving them the third floor back hall conference room to coordinate amendment and floor strategy.

Members of both parties were furious that Craddick granted a handful of lobbyists more power than any chairman or member in the institution.

With their new found majority, major Republican committee chairs were incensed that they were not permitted to run their committees. In fact, after working for years to get there, many Craddick chairs fled the House after one term in the majority.

The members do not and should not elect one of their own because of either personality or “policy outcomes.”

They give permission to one of their own to lead them because they trust that individual to run a fair process in which each member can represent their districts to the best of their ability. They seek a leader who pays more than lip service to the “will of the House”

Sure, there are always plays for personal advantage but after the previous six years under Speaker Craddick, veteran lawmakers were stunned and frankly delighted when Straus moved power back to the chairs and the members. Members who were never permitted to negotiate discovered that they could actually impact legislation without the permission of the Speaker.

Calendars Chair **Brian McCall** even dedicated a week of calendars to make sure that members who had not been permitted to get a bill to the floor in six years were given a legitimate shot.

Sadly, the outrage industry can claim only one victory from this tawdry melodrama. They were able to force the GOP caucus to take a non-binding vote on a speaker – something most veteran Republican lawmaker opposed.

In fact, during the three minutes allotted for Straus to speak to the Caucus, the Speaker told his colleagues that the vote was setting a bad precedent and he opposed the move. When he was finished speaking Caucus Chair **Larry Taylor** called for those supporting Straus to stand.

He stopped counting at 70 because it was obvious Straus had the support of more than 2/3s of the Republicans. There were more.

The purveyors of rage will find themselves unwelcome at the Capitol this session. Among other things, they confirmed that they doctor their “report cards” to produce outcomes favorable to the friends and adverse to independent members.

They impugned the integrity of the very people whose votes they seek.

The 101 Republicans will pass a strong socially conservative agenda in spite of the groups they now detest because most of the GOP members are socially conservative and represent socially conservative constituents. They will do their best to pass a budget that takes maximum care of their communities with diminishing available resources and no new taxes. They may not succeed, but they will care little about the approval of the outrage industry after the cavalier threats and intimidation of groups who so degraded the process in the last six weeks.

The outrage industry will no doubt field candidates in 2012, but redistricting shuffles the deck and there are always lots of challengers for newly configured districts. As they always do, Republicans and Democrats alike will have to go into their communities, explain what they did and once again win the support of their voters.

“HK” pieces are commentary and analysis reflecting only the views of QR editor Harvey Kronberg.

By Harvey Kronberg

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