

Two for One

For the first time in Oregon's history, the House is led by co-speakers.

BY PETER WONG

Bruce Hanna and Arnie Roblan are a Republican businessman and Democratic educator whose views on the role of government differ sharply. But it's what they have in common that really counts.

Despite poles-apart backgrounds and philosophies, they are making history. Hanna and Roblan are taking turns on the rostrum as the first co-speakers to lead the House since Oregon became a state 152 years ago. And they're also presiding over the chamber in the first session since voters in 2010 approved a measure to move the legislature from biennial sessions to yearly ones.

THE ODD COUPLE

Hanna, the classic pro-business Republican, ran small restaurants and developed his own ventures—selling 7-Up, RC Cola and other brands—and then took over his family's Coca-Cola bottling company before running for the legislature.

"When you are part of a third-tier distributor network, you take hard knocks," Hanna says. "But you learn to sell and you learn customer service."

At age 44, after stints as president of the Chamber of Commerce and the state soft drink association, Hanna won a seat in the Oregon House in 2005. His rise into the leadership ranks was swift. By fall 2007, after two sessions on

the legislative budget committee, he became the Republican caucus leader.

Roblan taught high school math and science, became a vice principal and then was a principal for 15 years. He received the Milken Education Award in 1997, the nation's preeminent teacher recognition program, hailed as the "Oscars of Teaching" by Teacher Magazine.

When he retired at age 56, Roblan, too, was first elected to a seat in the Oregon House in 2005. He became speaker pro tem and chairman of the rules committee four years later, and was part of the leadership team of former Speaker Dave Hunt.

Both represent adjoining districts in the southern part of Oregon, which has been losing timber jobs for decades, even before it was hit hard by the national recession.

STRIPES AND SPOTS

When the 2010 election tied the Oregon House, their respective caucuses turned to them to take on the difficult role of shared leadership, made even more challenging by a severe economic downturn in the state. The unlikely duo, both in their fourth terms in office, acknowledge their differences, recognize them as strengths, but admit that talking them through is critical.

"We continue to be who we are," Roblan says. "If I have stripes and he has spots, that's not changing. But we



REPRESENTATIVE
DAVE HUNT
OREGON



PHOTO BY LYNN HOWLETT

Representatives Bruce Hanna, left, and Arnie Roblan have taken on the unique roles of co-speakers in the Oregon House this session.

will communicate about those differences."

Democrat John Kitzhaber, who returned for an unprecedented third term as Oregon governor this year, says Hanna and Roblan are the best equipped to lead the House, where he began his own political career 32 years ago.

"I think Arnie Roblan and Bruce Hanna are doing an amazing job holding their caucuses together amid the tensions going on," Kitzhaber says. "I think we have the right team in the legislature at the right time to deal with this budget crisis and bring this state together, instead of tearing us apart."

The budget shortfall—estimated at \$3.5 billion for the two-year cycle—has cut deeply into the income tax collections Oregon relies on for state services, including aid to public schools.

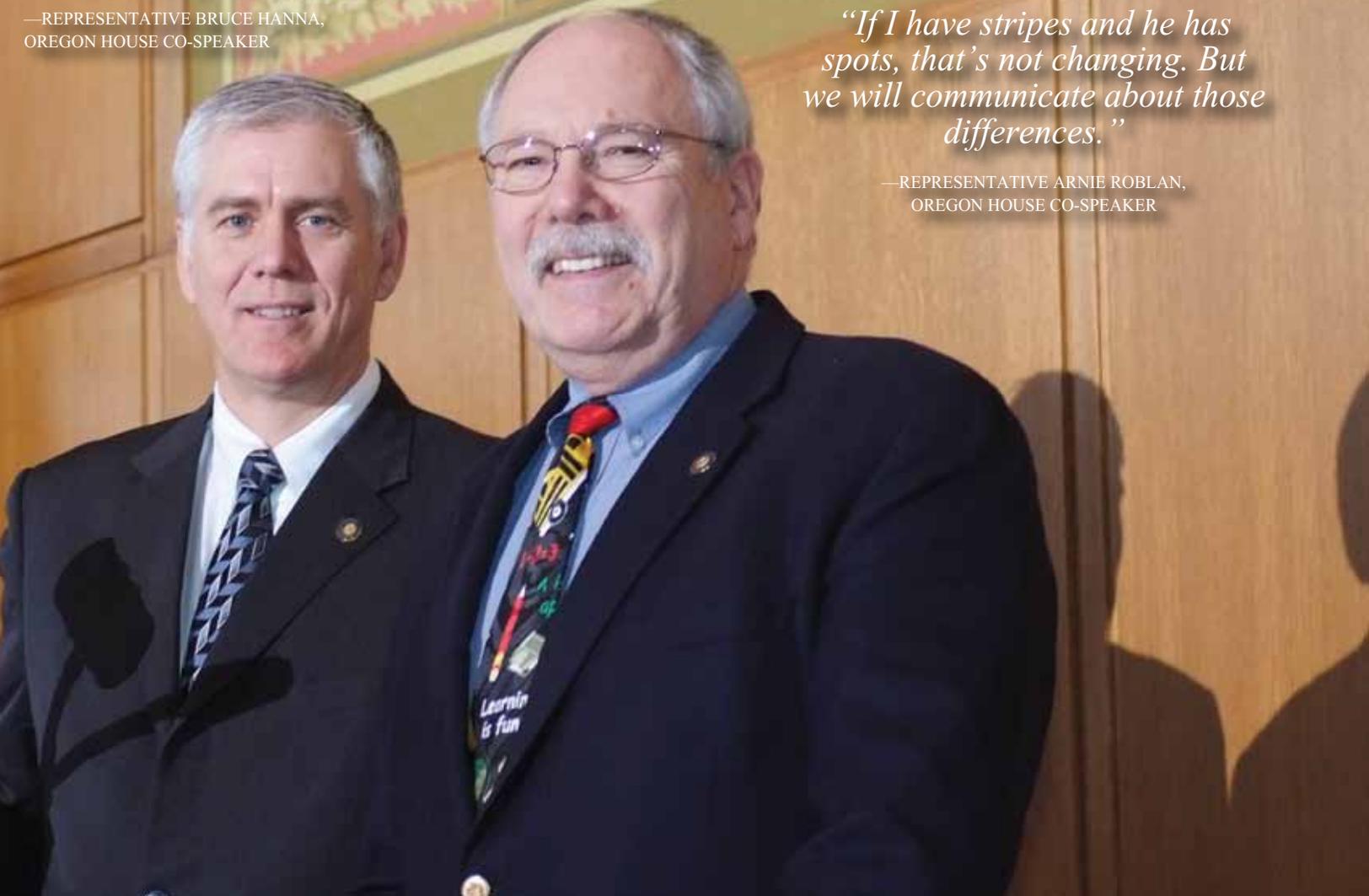
Peter Wong is a Capitol Bureau reporter for the Statesman Journal newspaper in Salem, Ore. and dean of the Capitol press corps.

“We have a historic opportunity to watch a unique event work well.”

—REPRESENTATIVE BRUCE HANNA,
OREGON HOUSE CO-SPEAKER

“If I have stripes and he has spots, that’s not changing. But we will communicate about those differences.”

—REPRESENTATIVE ARNIE ROBLAN,
OREGON HOUSE CO-SPEAKER



Oregon has no sales tax.

Hanna and Roblan don’t see eye to eye on the solution, but they faced a common problem: How to close a budget gap estimated to be as large as 20 percent for the next two years. They successfully created a budget approach to attack the problem and their caucuses agreed.

“Oregon does not have a revenue problem, we have a jobs problem,” Hanna says. “When we have people employed, we have plenty of money.”

But when people are unemployed, Roblan says, they need government to help.

“The federal government sent us money so we could respond [to the unemployment problem],” Roblan says, comparing it to the New Deal and the Great Depression in the 1930s. “This was a global recession that we needed to respond to. We got upset with what happened after Hurricane Katrina because the government didn’t step in after a major catastrophe,

and people suffered. What we need to do now is get back private-sector jobs—and then some.”

As presiding officers, they decided to organize the House on a power-sharing arrangement. They appointed co-chairmen and equal numbers from each party to the 13 House committees, and assigned them nearly 1,900 measures.

Balancing committee appointments was key to a successful session, particularly since the Oregon Legislative Assembly does not amend measures on the floor.

HOW IT HAPPENED

Two years ago, Democrats in the Oregon House under Speaker Dave Hunt had their greatest majority in 25 years—enough to pass revenue-raising measures with the 60 percent required under the constitution.

But the 2010 election changed that. Democrats lost six seats just two years after they had won

five from the Republicans, resulting in the tie.

Legislative party parity is not that uncommon. At least one legislative chamber has been tied after each election since 1984, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, for a total of 29. It happened in Oregon in 2002—in the Senate. But the upper chamber took a different approach to shared leadership.

Democrat Peter Courtney became Senate president in 2003 in a power-sharing arrangement that put a Republican as second in command. In 2004, Democrats won outright control, and today Courtney is serving a record fifth term as president.

Even though Oregon Senate Democrats now have a 16-14 majority, Courtney opted to split four of 10 committees evenly between par-



SENATE PRESIDENT
PETER COURTNEY
OREGON

ties and put Republicans in charge of some subcommittees.

“When these things happen, all the emphasis is on the chamber that is tied,” Courtney says. “One of the lessons we learned [from 2003] is that the chamber that is not tied has to spend as much time thinking about the chamber that is tied as it does itself.”

Courtney said he wanted members to be aware that bills passed on party-line votes in his chamber might have a tough time in the evenly split chamber—something he said the Republican-led Oregon House failed to take into account in 2003. He also said that on some issues such as redistricting, which Oregon legislators eventually accomplished themselves for the first time in a century, evenly split committees prompted compromise legislation in his chamber and facilitated its approval in the House.

WINGING IT

In the House this year, however, “there was no script for this situation,” Hanna says. “We talked with people at NCSL, with those in Washington state who had experienced it [in the House] after the 1998 and 2000 elections, and with our own senators.”

Hanna, who led his party’s resurgence in the House, was the natural candidate for co-speaker.

“He’s smart, he’s thoughtful, and he has good business sense and great presence,” says Republican Representative Vicki Berger. “He has come through as a solid leader in the legislature. He’s open and accessible. He’s honest and gets to the heart of issues. You can disagree with him—and I do—but it’s pretty respectful.”

It took longer for Roblan to emerge as the other candidate for co-speaker. Hunt was his party’s lead negotiator, but soon bowed out of a bid to hold onto the speakership.

“We needed a compromise candidate,” says Democratic Representative Brian Clem, “and Arnie was the ideal fit. He could get 30 votes from members who had been unhappy with where we had been. Arnie had the best temperament for the job.”

Clem graduated from the high school where Roblan was

vice principal, and in Clem’s senior year, principal. Clem concedes he was not a model student, but says Roblan was a mentor to him when he entered the House two years after Roblan.

When negotiations between Democrats and Republicans stalled over the rules to govern the evenly split chamber and how bills would advance through divided committees, Hanna and Roblan worked together to iron out a compromise.

Lawmakers “saw two people who made a commitment to work together, with their caucuses, to move forward,” Roblan says. “They did not hear that message until they saw the two of us there talking about doing it.”

“One of the lessons we learned [from 2003] is that the chamber that is not tied has got to spend as much time thinking about the chamber that is tied as it does itself.”

—SENATOR PETER COURTNEY,
OREGON SENATE PRESIDENT

Hanna agrees. “Once we did that, and our caucuses bought into it, we got through all the other co-governance issues.”

When opening day arrived on Jan. 10, the Oregon House elected Hanna and Roblan unanimously, and, by a 57-3 vote, adopted rules—including one that allowed two members of each party to request a public hearing or work session on any bill.

Representative Kevin Cameron, who succeeded Hanna as House Republican leader, said the results that day set the tone for the entire session.

“I’ve always said that to be a good leader, you have to be a good follower and respect the authority you operate under,” says Cameron, who like Hanna and Roblan is in his fourth term. “So when you look at the model starting with the co-speakers, I feel good about following them.”

IN PRACTICE

Hanna and Roblan have a joint staff meeting Monday mornings, and sometimes more often.

Except for a single communications director, they have their own staffs and their offices are on the same floor.

“There is a little bit of natural tension,” Hanna says in assessing the situation. Indeed, that tension broke out in April with a disagreement between the co-leaders of the education committee—a Democrat who had been on her school board in a university community and a Republican who was a school-choice advocate for a free-market think tank.

In the health care committee Republicans shelved seven bills backed by Democrats—and then Democrats tabled two bills sought by Republicans in the agriculture committee.

“The reality is that not everybody is happy with this,” Roblan says. “There have been a number of times when some of the co-chairs have not seen eye to eye. We’ve told them that before it becomes a real problem, they should talk to either one of us, and we’ll have a meeting.”

Jim Moore, who teaches politics at Pacific University, said the co-speakership is an uneasy coexistence for the parties.

“The leaders forge ways of working together, as they have here, but members don’t necessarily go along with them,” Moore says. “The leaders know that, and it gives [the members] a way to blow off steam.”

Hunt, the former House speaker, shares the gavel as co-chairman of the rules committee, which traditionally controls the flow of bills toward the close of Oregon’s sessions. This time, however, the committee has taken on almost 200 bills.

“We’re getting an interesting panoply of issues—even more than normal—because we are getting bills the co-speakers cannot agree on where to send,” Hunt says, including bills that otherwise would have gone to the education committee.

Still, Hanna and Roblan were optimistic about guiding the 2011 session to a close and preparing for Oregon’s first regular even-numbered-year session next February.

Under the co-leaders they appointed to the joint budget committee, lawmakers had successfully developed a budget framework that—with modifications—appeared headed for approval by the start of Oregon’s next two-year budget cycle on July 1.

“We have a historic opportunity to watch a unique event work well,” Hanna says.

“The expectation was never high that we would be successful, Roblan says. “But it has been for us.”



REPRESENTATIVE
VICKI BERGER
OREGON



REPRESENTATIVE
BRIAN CLEM
OREGON



REPRESENTATIVE
KEVIN CAMERON
OREGON