ONE OF OUR OWN

Tim Massaule: Man of the House

The long time parliamentarian of the Arkansas House embodies a combination of political power, institutional memory, legendary status and public service.

By Art English

O n any given day, it is almost a sure thing that you will find Tim Masaunelli, parliamentarian of the Arkansas House of Representatives, in his small office just off the House chamber. Massaunelli might be carrying on an animated conversation with Speaker of the House Benny Petrus, or on the phone responding to a legislator’s question about when a bill will come up in the Senate or if an emergency clause takes effect or meeting with staff about an upcoming legislative orientation session. It might even be a call from Girls or Boys State to help them select the people they would like to meet or from folks requesting his expertise to help them run the Silver Haired Legislature.

Whatever the nature of the interaction, you can be certain it involves legislative processes and the Arkansas House of Representa- tives, a body that Massaunelli has served for 34 years.

It is probably not significant that Massaunelli’s third floor office is just above the governor’s in the Capitol. But some would say that it is important and in his own way and in his own sphere, Tim Massaunelli, whose official title is parliamentarian, coordinator of legislative services and assistant to the speaker, has had as much influence over the lawmaking process as any of the last six governors combined. “Tim Massaunelli has probably forgotten more about the operations of the House of Representatives than anyone else ever knew,” says former Governor Mike Huckabee. “He has been the go-to guy on rules and has been viewed as

one whose mastery of the process has helped shape each legislative session.”

HOUSE LEGEND

When Massaunelli arrived in the House as a sound man and unofficial parliamentarian in 1973, Dale Bumpers was governor of Arkansas, Richard Nixon was president and Arkansas was just emerging as part of the “sun belt.” It was a place of increasing economic, political and social interest for thousands of people from the East and Midwest bent on relocating to the “Land of Opportunity.” By the time Governor Bill Clinton won the re-election in 1982, Tim Massaunelli was trucking along on his way to becoming a House legend. The Arkansas General Assembly at that time was dominated by senior legislators. The ordinary member in this era had usually served an average of 10 years, and more than a few legislators had tenures of over 20 years. Turnover, which once ran more than 30 percent in many legislatures, was half that in the Arkansas General Assembly. Staff resources were also limited in this part-time body that is constitutionally mandated to meet for a biennial 60-day session beginning in early January of odd years but usually takes 75 to 90 days to complete its business.

Speakers of the House at this time were important figures, but the office had fundamental limitations. Speakers served traditionally just one two-year term and they were not expected to pursue legislative agendas during their tenure. Speakers did not have the power to appoint committee chairs or to make committee assignments. What power the speaker had was limited by the power of senior legislators who in some cases chaired more than one committee, often running those committees as personal fiefdoms.

Joha Paul Caps, now a state senator, was speaker during the tumultuous 1983 session when Bill Clinton introduced a 1 percent increase in the sales tax to raise teacher salaries and tied it to teacher testing in order to obtain voter support. The House was dominated by strong chairmen and personalities. Caps remembers Massaunelli telling him, “Bois, there’s 99 of them and just two of us, but I like our odds.”

HUMOR HELPS

One does not become a House institution just because of a good sense of humor, though Massaunelli’s wit is renowned in the corridors of the Capitol. Massaunelli’s reputation has been built upon service, the trust he

has engendered in the position of parliamentarian, his expertise with the rules, and his evenhandedness in dealing with legislators. Former speakers recalled that you could trust him implicitly to give an impartial rendering of the rules, that nobody knew the rules better than he did, that his judgment was unerring, and that any advice offered was always in the form of a suggestion leaving the final decision to the elected representative.

For Massaunelli, who affectionately is called “boss” by the 22 House staff members he supervises, the respect he holds for the elected members of the Arkansas House and the Office of Speaker borders on sheer reverence.

“Your place is to serve the institution and its members to the best of my ability. I just

work here. These men and women have been elected by the people to act on their behalf. I just do my best to assist them in that mission. And every speaker I have had the good fortune to work with has stepped up, put any agenda they might have had aside, and worked for the betterment of the House.”

When Massaunelli came to work in the House in 1973 there were no permanent employees. After the session was over, the legislators went home and the Legislative Council, a small group of senior legislators who came to the Capitol periodically, handled any business that needed to be conducted. A small staff that comprised the Bureau of Legislative Research supported them. But legislators were changing, even part-time legislators and 17 different speakers. To watch Massaunelli work as a House parliamentarian might be compared to watching a master conductor at the symphony, a field judge at the Cotton Bowl, or a baseball umpire calling an intramural softball game all wrapped up in one small but powerful package. He is in charge, has the physical look of your favorite uncle, and has the unerring ability to be relevantly subtle.

Massaunelli knows his place at the speaker’s podium; he is there to make the legislative process flow as smoothly as it possibly can. At one point he might be seen whispering into the speaker’s ear reminding him of the particular words a procedure must start with, or he might be informing the speaker that a member in the far corner of the chamber is going to help moving for recognition, or let the speaker know that the member excitingly gesturing for recognition has already spoken on the question and need not be recognized again.

Former Governor and Senator David Pryor says Massaunelli is as important to the legislative process as the Capitol dome itself. The fact that each and every new lawmaker must go through a thorough Massaunelli orchestrated orientation session before they begin to legislate—makes him one of the most influential people in the Capitol. That power by proxy; position and experience has inspired respect by legislators and staff alike. House staff members know Massaunelli as their friend and colleague and look up to him, but they also know how much trouble they will be in if their work reflects badly on the House. Massaunelli’s ability to get along with virtually everyone and make those feel special is a personality trait that has endeared him to these generations of legislators. I always enjoyed working with Tim,” says Former President Bill Clinton. “In a lot of tough situations, when he was calm, did his duty, kept his sense

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A GOOD PREPARATION

Massaunelli’s preparation for the position was aided by a family who passionately believed in civic involvement. It’s an ethic he has instilled in his three sons, one of whom is chief of staff for U.S. Senator Mark Pryor and another a federal marshal. Growing up in Pine Bluff, Ark., a town of about 50,000, Massaunelli learned how to run several small businesses, and worked in a number of political campaigns. By the time he got to the Arkansas General Assembly he had all the skills a person would need to be successful in a legislative setting: expertise in parliamentary procedure, administrative savvy, and a natural ability to work with the 100 different personalities that make up any one biennial session of the legislature.

“Your place is to serve the institution and its members to the best of my ability. I just...
While state legislators may have differing positions on how to deal with alcohol offenders, there's one thing most will probably agree on — random testing methods are just not effective. Most offenders know how to drink around them, plus they only provide a snapshot glimpse of what's really going on. Relying on them is like going down the same road over and over again... but believing you'll get different results.

However, there's one solution on the market today that continuously monitors alcohol consumption — SCRAM® (Secure Continuous Remote Alcohol Monitor).

The SCRAM ankle bracelet offers complete 24x7 data on offender drinking patterns, which leads to unprecedented levels of accountability. SCRAM is based on scientifically-proven technology, and has been consistently validated in both bond- and probation-revocation hearings in courtrooms across the country.

SCRAM is currently being used in 43 states, and is becoming a growing part of many states' legislative strategies. More state legislators are now incorporating continuous alcohol monitoring (CAM) — and SCRAM — programs into their alcohol offender legislation.

of humor, and always knew what was really going on. When he could do so consistent with the duty to the House, he would even tell me what was going on! I love the guy. We need more people with his dedication to public service.”

Johnson says Massanelli’s specialty is assisting everyone. “He can advise legislator A on a matter pertinent to the House and then advise legislator B who is opposing A’s motion on the same question giving them both fair, even handed objective advice, right down the middle.”

RIGHT DOWN THE MIDDLE

Right down the middle is a good metaphor for Tim Massanelli, who loves the game of golf where shot routine and knowledge of the written as well as unwritten rules are essential. “Tim knows the rules of the legislative game,” says one former speaker. “Well, heck—he wrote most of them.” He expects everyone else to know them too, because a game without rules, Massanelli says, “is a game that has no regular flow. Even in an individual sport like golf, courtesy, honesty, tradition and proper procedure in the long run are more important than individual performance.” For Massanelli, rules and proper procedure are so important that a rule making them important is codified into House Rule 9. That rule simply but emphatically says, “It shall be the duty of each representative to know, practice and preserve Parliamentary Law.”

Perhaps Massanelli’s greatest contributions to the House have come since term limits. Adopted in 1992, Arkansas term limits are among the strictest in the nation, limiting members of the House to three two-year terms for life. Working with House leaders and staff, Massanelli designed new processes for the legislature to cope with term limits. Legislative orientations went from one and two days to a full week with simulations of committee meetings and legislative sessions. Joyce Elliot, a recently term-limited legislator, remembers that Massanelli “instructed them to use the rules and become reliant on the rules themselves rather than relying on him.”

With seniority no longer a major factor in organizing the House, the rules were adapted to allow the speaker to appoint committee chairs and vice chairs. Massanelli even worked up a new procedure where members could amend their own bills to avoid slowing down legislative work on the floor and giving term-limited legislators more time to legislate.

Tim Massanelli is a man of the House. In times when tradition and history are often ignored or forgotten, it is his mission to preserve all that is good and instructive about the Arkansas House of Representatives.