

Tim Massanelli: 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

On any given day, it is almost a sure thing that you will find Tim Massanelli, parliamentarian of the Arkansas House of Representatives, in his small office just off the House chamber. Massanelli 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 without 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 organize their model legislature 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 the legislative process and the Arkansas House of Representatives, a body that Massanelli has served for 34 years.

It is probably not significant that Massanelli's third floor office is just above the governor's in the Capitol. But some would say that in his own way and in his own sphere, Tim Massanelli, whose official title is parliamentarian, coordinator of legislative services and assistant to the speaker, has had as much influence over the lawmaking process as some governors. If Massanelli's influence is a subject of Capitol conjecture, his service is not. He has been at the Capitol longer than any of the last six governors combined. "Tim Massanelli has probably forgot 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 Massanelli 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 Massanelli was already 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 over 20 years. Turnover, which often runs 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 their own legislative agenda 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.

John Paul Capps, now a state senator, was speaker during the tumultuous 1983 session

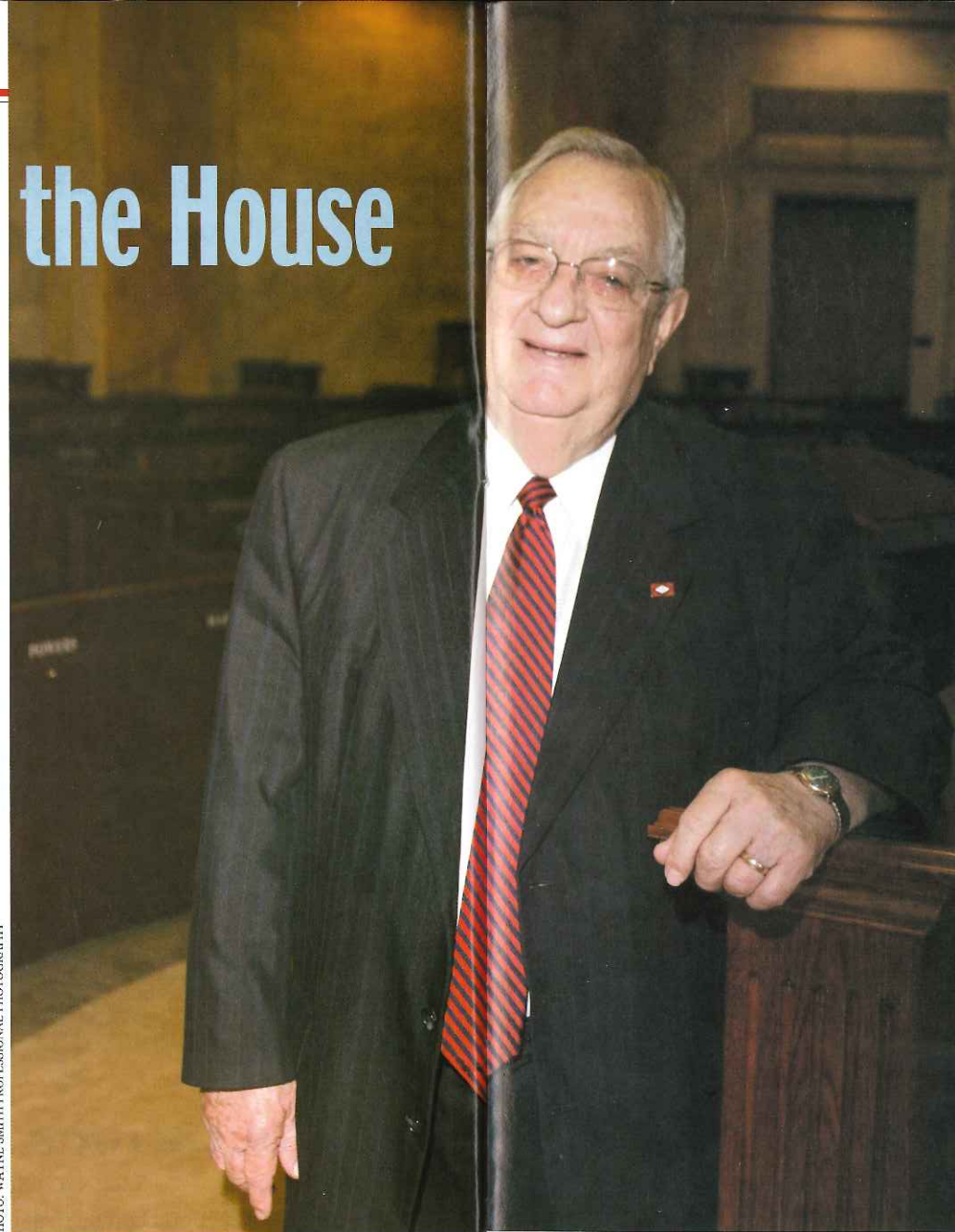
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Arkansas Parliamentarian Tim Massanelli has served under 17 speakers.

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. Capps remembers Massanelli telling him, "Boss, 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 Massanelli's wit is renowned in the corridors of the Capitol. Massanelli's reputation has been built upon service, the trust he



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 Massanelli 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 legislatures were changing, even part-time

ent legislators and 17 different speakers.

To watch Massanelli work as 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.

Massanelli 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

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citizen ones, and Arkansas needed someone who could help members off session, channel requests, assist with constituency services and be available as needed.

Massanelli showed up at the right time. "Tim brought so much to the job right from the start," says Chief of the House Staff Finos "Buddy" Johnson.

A GOOD PREPARATION

Massanelli'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, Massanelli 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 House. Massanelli has done this for 18 sessions, working with well over 1,000 differ-

member in the far corner of the chamber is calling for recognition, or letting the speaker know that the member excitedly gesturing for recognition has already spoken on the question and need not be recognized again.

Former Governor and Senator David Pryor says Massanelli is as important to the legislative process as the Capitol dome itself. The fact that each and every new speaker must depend upon him for their socialization to the job—and each and every new lawmaker must go through a thorough Massanelli 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 Massanelli 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.

Massanelli's ability to get along with virtually everyone and make them feel special is a personality trait that has endeared him to three generations of legislators. "I always enjoyed working with Tim," says former President Bill Clinton. "In the toughest legislative battles, he was calm, did his duty, kept his sense

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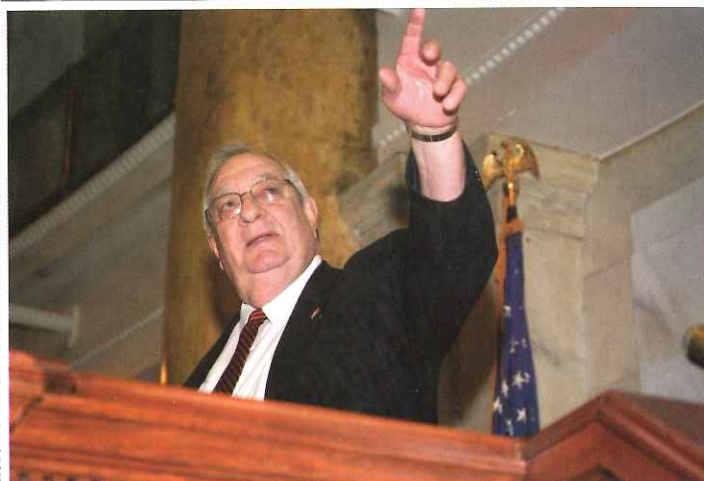


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of humor, and always knew what was really going on. When he could do so consistent with the duty to the House, he would even tell me what was going on! I love the guy. We need more people with his dedication to public service."

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.