

LEADING LIGHT

West Virginia Senate President Earl Ray Tomblin is the recipient of this year's Excellence in State Legislative Leadership Award.

Earl Ray Tomblin runs a tight ship. From insisting on appropriate attire in the Senate chamber to keeping a taut fiscal leash on the state budget to his own record of perfect attendance during 35 years in the Legislature, the president of the West Virginia Senate has a reputation for getting things done. It's a track record that earned him this year's Excellence in State Legislative Leadership Award, the nation's top legislative honor.

"I was just shocked and honored that I was able to receive the leadership award," Tomblin says. "I didn't realize I was up for consideration. Apparently my staff and others keep some secrets from me."

Tomblin, a Democrat who became Senate president in 1995, not only has had the longest tenure in that office, but is also West Virginia's longest serving senator. He was elected in 1980 after serving from 1974 to 1980 in the House of Delegates.

It's a perspective that informs how Tomblin handles the job.

"I came here when I was a senior in college," he says. "I think people rely more on their legislators than they did then. People are just much more aware of their legislators and how they can be of assistance."

The leadership award is presented annually by NCSL and the State Legislative Leaders Foundation. It honors leaders whose careers embody the highest principles of leadership and have shown a commitment to protecting and strengthening the institution of the state legislature.

"It is an honor to commend Senator Earl Ray Tomblin's service with the Excellence in Legislative Leadership Award," says William T. Pound, executive director of NCSL. "As president of the West Virginia Senate he exemplifies the most important qualities of a leader—integrity, fairness and compassion. He has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to preserving and strengthening the Legislature."

Stephen G. Lakis, president of the State Legislative Leaders Foundation, called Tomblin "an example for all aspiring leaders. Throughout his long and distinguished career,



Senator Tomblin has set many examples of what an exceptional leader can accomplish. He has the respect and admiration of his peers for his fairness, honesty, and willingness to put aside partisan differences."

Tomblin had plenty of support in his nomination for the award from the top tier of West Virginia politics. Governor Joe Manchin III called him a "problem solver and consensus builder who can be counted upon to give 100 percent of his focus on doing what is best for West Virginia regardless of the issue."

Senator Robert Byrd, the U.S. Senate's senior member, particularly praised Tomblin's efforts on behalf of education in the state, pointing to passage of a school building authority and a scholarship program for disadvantaged students.

But maybe the most heartfelt support came from Raamie Barker, who nominated Tomblin for the award. Barker is chief of staff to Tomblin but has known him since childhood and was his high school government teacher. "Believe me, the relationship is vastly different now—the student teaches the teacher," he wrote in his nominating letter.

Tomblin became Senate president after considerable turmoil surrounding the post. Two previous Senate presidents were convicted in federal court for abuse of power

issues. Tomblin has restored public confidence in the office.

He's been involved in major ethics reform throughout state government. He also has served in a number of national organizations, including the Southern Legislative Conference, Council of State Governments, NCSL, Senate Presidents' Forum and the Southern State Senate Leaders' Conference.

Tomblin, who served as chair of the finance committee before becoming president, also has been deeply involved in keeping West Virginia's fiscal affairs on an even keel. It is one of only a handful of states that didn't face a budget shortfall in FY 2009.

"We've got to be fiscally responsible," he said, asked what advice he might offer other lawmakers facing deep fiscal troubles. "You've got to pay your bills and not spend more money than you have. Sometimes it's not easy. Everyone needs more money for their programs. Sometimes you just have to say no."

Whether Tomblin remains Senate president may depend upon what other options open up. He became West Virginia's first lieutenant governor under legislation passed in 2000. Tomblin acknowledges that he might be interested in moving to the governor's seat if it opens up at some point in the future.

"I like to keep my options open. The governor and I were just elected to four-year terms, but I would not rule out anything," he says.

The example he has set in his remarkable tenure in the Senate is one of effectiveness and cooperation. Asked his parting advice for other legislative leaders, Tomblin says: "I think consensus building, involving your members, giving your chairs some freedom or latitude to run their own committees are important for a leader. More than anything else, it's consensus building and letting everyone have their say."