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A Remarkable Man

William T. Pound is stepping down as executive director of NCSL, leaving legislatures stronger than he found them.

BY CARL TUBBESING

Bill Pound and I came to NCSL shortly after its birth in 1975. Our first boss was Jim Edgar, who later became governor of Illinois. Jim tells a story about the first trip he and Bill made together. They were at a meeting, the first of thousands. When they came back to the hotel after dinner, Jim went to his room and Bill stayed downstairs to socialize. The next morning, Bill couldn't wait to tell Jim how he stayed up till 2 a.m. talking to a legislative

staff member about parliamentary procedure and legislative politics. Jim says he knew then, in the new organization's first few months, that Bill was made for NCSL.

Jim was prescient. If ever there was a perfect fit between an organization, its members, its mission and its staff leader, the match between NCSL and Bill Pound is it. I am not objective about this. He was my boss, but we also were close friends. That put me in an ideal position to observe and marvel in the qualities that have made Bill Pound synonymous with NCSL for the past 32 years.

When NCSL was created 44 years ago, legislatures were going through an intense period of modernization, adding staff, removing restrictions on when they could meet, strengthening committees, raising legislator salaries. Our brand-new organization thrived in this environment. Legislators and staff needed services and NCSL quickly became their trusted, objective source for policy analysis, training, workshops, technical assistance, publications and representation in Washington, D.C. These early years established a culture of responsiveness and adaptability that has guided NCSL ever since.

A Long List of Achievements

Under Bill's leadership, first when he became director of state services, then, beginning in 1987, as executive director, NCSL became one of the most respected and successful public organizations in the country. The list of achievements is vast—helping legislatures reform their budget processes; assisting others with overhauls of their rules; training new legislative leaders, committee chairs and legislative staff; orchestrating landmark lobbying victories in Washington, D.C.; conducting staff compensation studies in numerous legislatures; providing research and producing publications on the incredible array of issues legislatures contend with every year; using technology to facilitate information sharing among the states; promoting international understanding through exchange programs and technical assistance projects in other countries. That, of course, just scratches the surface.

Bill might say that anyone could have accomplished all of this. He would say that NCSL has succeeded because of the support, commitment, energy and creativity of the hundreds of legislators, legislative staff and NCSL staff who have led the organization's efforts for the past 44 years. That, of course, is undeniable. What is also undeniable is that Bill brought special qualities to his position that made him and NCSL a perfect fit.

Let's start with his unbridled passion for state legislatures—the institutions, their politics, the legislators and staff who



Bill Pound, "a country boy who made good," as his hometown newspaper described him, showed his leadership skills while at the University of Denver, where he became president of both the Board of Governors and the Student Senate. Here he is, far right, with fellow students, from left, Jim Easton, Frank Johnson and Al Scrafin.

populate them, the lobbyists and many others who are part of the state legislative community. That 2 a.m. story was just Bill's first venture into the late-night/early-morning cycle: listening to stories, telling his own, fielding compliments and complaints and learning, always learning.

Bill's passion for legislatures translated into dedication and sacrifice. Without hesitation he would stay late on a Friday to answer an urgent information request. Give up his Sunday afternoon so he could be in Washington, D.C., first thing Monday. Spend January on the road because he was in demand at new-legislator orientations. Even sleep in his chair in the Washington office when his flight home from Dulles had been canceled.

Bill's knowledge is encyclopedic. He reads, listens, absorbs, distills and interprets. State budgets and tax policy were particular specialties from his earliest days on the job; but you wouldn't want to go up against him on "Jeopardy!" on any other state issue, either. He knows federal issues because they affect the states. His knowledge of state legislatures is un-

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Robin Vos, Wisconsin Assembly speaker and incoming president of NCSL

matched, even with a staff full of legislative experts.

Bill revels in the people of the state legislative community. Getting a call from an old friend is a special pleasure. His excitement at making new acquaintances has never abated. Whether longtime friends or new, he delights in mining their knowledge of their legislature, hearing what they have to say about NCSL, talking politics and policy and learning about their families. Not surprisingly, his enthusiasm for people is infectious. Most of us, upon returning from a trip, couldn't wait to drop by his office and tell him whom we had met and what we had learned.

Balance in All Things

This piece, of course, will make Bill uncomfortable. He will read this and walk down to the publications staff and say, "I can't let you run this. It's not balanced. There's no opposing viewpoint. Carl's biases are showing." Anticipating this scenario, I conducted a highly scientific poll of two people who have known Bill especially well over the past several decades—his daughter Rebecca and myself. In the interest of balance, here are three Bill Pound foibles we were able to identify.

One, Bill is a terrible judge of distances. Rebecca remembers an incident just before the 1982 Annual Meeting in Chicago. (That's what we called the Legislative Summit back in the day.) NCSL staff, including Bill, spent the day stuffing 3,000 packets to be given to the attendees at registration. Twelve-year-old Rebecca helped out. When we were finally done, several of us decided to have dinner at The Berghoff, a storied German restaurant in the Loop.

"It's not far," Bill said.

"How far?" asked Rebecca. "Can't we take a cab? I'm tired."

"It's not far. Let's walk," Bill said. A block or two into the walk (any parent knows what's coming next), Rebecca asks, "How much farther, Dad?" In classic dad fashion, Bill responds, "Not much farther, Becca." Another block or two, same ques-

"SIMILAR ORGANIZATIONS HAVE ENDURED ROUGH TIMES IN THE LAST TWO DECADES. NCSL HAS MAINTAINED ITS STRONG BIPARTISAN REPUTATION IN LARGE PART THANKS TO BILL'S STEADY HAND AND DURABLE LEADERSHIP."

Chuck Truesdell, Legislative Fiscal Analyst, Kentucky

"BILL POUND IS NCSL. BILL LOVES THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS. HE HAS WORKED AND PUSHED NCSL CONSTANTLY TO BE THE AIDE LEGISLATURES NEED. IN GEORGIA, THE FIRST PLACE THAT WE LOOKED FOR ANSWERS WAS NCSL."

Don Balfour, NCSL president 2009-10 and former Georgia senator

tion, same answer.

When they finally made it to the restaurant. "It was way over a mile," Rebecca says.

"Oh, no. It wasn't that far," claims her father.

Two, Bill's words don't always mean what they appear to mean because he hates saying "no." Take his two-word response to a variety of questions, especially those beginning with "May we ..." or "What about ..." or "Why don't we ..." Rebecca says she and her brother Michael learned early on that Bill's "we'll see" really meant "no." Not surprisingly, most NCSL staff have come to the same conclusion over the years. The dreaded "We'll see" meant you weren't going to get that extra \$5,000 in your budget or receive that promotion you'd been hoping for.

Three, Bill has a temper, but he doesn't display it in public and hardly ever in the confines of the NCSL offices. But baseball, one of Bill's great passions beyond NCSL, is another matter. Before the Colorado Rockies became Denver's team, Bill had spent his life as a Dodger fan. He was used to success. In the 1966 World Series,

the Dodgers faced the Baltimore Orioles. In game 2, star Dodger outfielder Willie Davis made three errors in one inning, losing three fly balls in the sun. After the third error, Bill, watching at home, ripped off his glasses, threw them at the TV and yelled, "Catch the d*** ball!" The glasses broke and the Dodgers were swept in four games.

So there you have it, a balanced look at a remarkable man. Bill is deliberate and fair. He grasps the nuances of complicated political and policy matters. He is proud of the NCSL staff and the impact they have had on legislatures and state and federal policy outcomes. He is trusted, respected and revered in the state legislative community and beyond.

Bill was made for NCSL. With the help and support of innumerable legislative staff, legislators and NCSL staff, Bill, in turn, made NCSL what it is today.



Carl Tubbesing joined NCSL shortly after its inception in 1975 and later served as its deputy executive director.