

THE LANEY LEGACY IN TEXAS POLITICS by William Lutz

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Pete Laney Former House Speaker Pete Laney tied the record for longest tenure in the history of the Texas House of Representatives. His retirement announcement Dec. 2 cannot pass without some comment about what he brought to Texas government.

Right now, the major newspapers are canonizing Laney. To the press, he could do no wrong.

The uniformly positive coverage the former speaker received is quite ironic, because for most of his tenure he avoided on-the-record policy discussions with the press. Only late in his tenure did he even hire a full-time press secretary.

The word "bipartisan" appeared near Laney's name in just about every news story. But was Pete Laney really bipartisan?

Certainly during his first two terms in office, Republicans did quite well. Several key Republicans who made possible his ascendancy, including his ultimate successor, Tom Craddick, got chairmanships. With Laney's help, Gov. George W. Bush's 1994 campaign agenda became 1995 law.

Each worked with the other, not on account of fealty to some abstract ideal of bipartisanship but rather because cooperation served each man's political purposes. Texas, and particularly rural Texas, was becoming more and more Republican in the 1990s.

Even with the gerrymandered 1991 redistricting map, the shift in rural politics would have allowed Republicans to gain a narrow majority in the House under the right conditions.

Bush prolonged Laney's, and the Democrats's, hold on the House. He refused to campaign against incumbent Democrats. In 1998, he all but endorsed several of Laney's lieutenants by appearing in their districts to "accept" their endorsements of him.

Bush benefited from this arrangement because several senior Democrats went on the campaign trail for him. To win swing states, the governor wanted a "bipartisan" pedigree. Laney and his team provided just that.

Even in the climate of the late 1990s, however, shades of a more partisan brand of Texas politics began to occur, intensifying after 1997 when Laney sought a third term. (Many expected him to seek only two terms.)

Democrats and Republicans will disagree on who deserves blame for this, but Texas politics became more polarized along party lines after 1997.

For all the press clippings describing Laney as bipartisan, the 1999 purge remains one of the most polarizing events in Texas politics. That year Laney ousted four of his Republican lieutenants from their chairmanships — Craddick at Ways and Means, Kenny Marchant at Financial Institutions, Harvey Hilderbran at Human Services, and Fred Hill at Urban Affairs. A fifth Republican, Dianne White Delisi, was dumped as vice chairman of Appropriations. Their sackings were widely attributed to their work on the "8 in 98" campaign, which sought a Republican House majority in the 1998 elections.

In the late 1990s, House Republicans split into two camps — one that cooperated with Laney and one that wanted to move more in the direction of a congressional-style party caucus system.

If the 1999 sackings were an effort to stop the spread of partisanship in Texas politics, it backfired.

True, Republican caucus members elected David Swinford, a Laney lieutenant, as vice chairman of the Republican caucus over Arlene Wohlgemuth in 1999. But Laney wasn't the only issue in that race. Swinford was personally popular with many House Republicans, won the support of West Texas conservatives, and was one of the most consistently conservative of Laney's lieutenants. (Swinford and John Smithee were two of the first West Texas Republicans to sign on with Craddick's 2003 speaker campaign.)

But the sackings turned all five into martyrs. Their profile among grass-roots Republicans increased. Several were beloved by their colleagues. And some in the caucus who tried to work with Laney became more partisan after seeing their friends get the axe. (Marchant was elected, unopposed, as chairman of the House Republican caucus in 1999 and used the position to help Bush. He even managed to cooperate with Laney.)

In the long run, getting fired as Ways and Means chairman helped, not hurt, Craddick's eventual bid for speaker, because it put beyond question his GOP credentials. The sackings, along with the departure of Bush to Washington, intensified efforts among GOP faithful to elect a Republican House majority.

Another instrument of Laney-esque partisanship was the House Calendars committee, which generally had an 8-3 Democratic majority. The Calendars committee allows the silent assassination of conservative bills with widespread support in the House.

In 1997, Republican caucus chairman Kent Grusendorf proposed a series of reforms to the House rules, including eliminating Calendars' ability to kill bills with broad support. The proposals have still not been enacted, and the Calendars committee remains a common source of (usually anonymous) complaint from rank-and-file members.

The press also glosses over the achievements Laney made to advance Democratic interests. The James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Act, the Children's Health Insurance Program, the teacher pay raises and health insurance bills, and the Robin Hood school finance system all occurred on Laney's watch.

Additional GOP initiatives, such as tort reform and welfare reform, got watered down or stopped altogether.

In short, Laney's "bipartisanship" was never a function of ideology. It was a function of politics.

So what is Laney's contribution to Texas government? What can current Republican leaders learn from Pete Laney?

A lot. Particularly in the first two terms, Laney made ethics reform a priority. The improvements Laney made in the House rules, particularly the deadlines that allow members to read bills before they vote on them, are still there today.

Laney first entered the House in the wake of the Sharpstown scandal, and he learned its lessons. He understood, in a way that current political leaders do not, the importance of appearances. It's not enough to be ethical. Elected officials must conduct themselves in a manner that creates a public appearance that inspires confidence in the integrity of government.

True, it's easier for Democrats to meet this standard. Minor ethical breaches by Democrats will get overlooked by the newspapers while similar conduct by Republicans appears on the front page.

Yet Laney was willing to sacrifice part of his agenda to promote an ethical appearance. If a bill of his fell apart on the House floor, he seldom tried to undermine the will of the House in conference committee. He expected his chairmen to treat witnesses respectfully in hearings. Every session, one or two priority items he mentioned in his first-day-of-session speech wouldn't happen because House members came up with good reasons why they did not want them.

In short, there were limits to how far Laney would go in accomplishing his policy goals.

The retirement of Laney marks the end of an era. Texas used to be governed by a group of pragmatic, competent, rural Democrats who emphasized problem-solving over passing a pre-set agenda. Several of his rural Democratic chairmen, such as Rob Junell, Bob Turner, and Tom Ramsay, contributed greatly and are missed today. Now these types of rural Democrats are an endangered species. Granted, toward the end of their sway the rural Democrats probably governed a bit to the left of the state's electorate. But they also solved problems that would have tied some in the GOP in knots.

Laney never forgot agriculture, his region, or his West Texas values. This publication has been, at times, harshly critical of some of Laney's actions. Yet he has always been a perfect gentleman to this reporter.

His gentlemanly demeanor explains, perhaps better than anything else, why Laney has such a following at the Capitol.