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In legislature, freshmen rebels with a cause

Twelve Oregon House members face first-year lessons but make a mark

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SALEM -- The 12 members of the House freshman class were so bothered over a partisan meltdown on the floor that they drafted a scolding letter to their colleagues: "Recent events have reflected poorly on the integrity of the House."

The letter, recently distributed on the House floor, is a "heartfelt statement of principle," says Rep. David Edwards, D-Hillsboro. "We wanted to put leaders of both caucuses on notice: We have little patience for partisan gamesmanship."

There was a time when first-year legislators kept quiet and learned from the old-timers. Not the 10 Democrats and two Republicans in this year's House freshman class. They didn't win competitive elections or take time away from their families and businesses to come to Salem and shut up.

In fact, some Capitol insiders say the 2007 freshmen might be the most promising class in more than 30 years. They're highly educated: Eight hold graduate degrees. One has a doctorate, another is a Rhodes Scholar. Politically, they span the spectrum from small-town conservative to Portland leftie. And they bring considerable civic and professional experience to the job.

Several have taken on highly visible roles, including leading the floor debate on legislation establishing a rainy day savings account and on bills outlawing discrimination against gays and lesbians. Others are working behind the scenes to find consensus on everything from a statewide computer recycling law to corporate tax policy.

Ranging in age from 30 to 60, these freshmen also do what newcomers often do -- ruffle the old-timers' feathers. They bring energy into the Capitol that can make veterans want to shush them or advise them of that unwritten rule of Capitol culture: Pick your shots.

"What you have to learn is how to be effective. That's most important," says Rep. Mitch Greenlick, D-Portland. "And being effective is not to be the smartest or the loudest. . . . You really have to spend a ton of time building relationships."

This year's freshmen have made their share of rookie mistakes. At the same time, the 2007 class is being favorably compared to the class of 1973 -- another prolific and politically ambitious crew that included U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer and former Portland Mayor (and House Speaker) Vera Katz.

"I'm struck by the talent that's come into the building," says Gary Conkling, who has worked inside the Capitol as a reporter, then lobbyist, on and off since 1973.

The 2007 and 1973 classes do have circumstances in common. Both arrived in Salem the year the Democrats took control of both the House and Senate after several sessions of sharing power with Republicans. Both are relatively large classes, which means even newcomers get pressed into service as committee vice chairs.

Ordinarily, it takes time for a freshman to get up to speed.

"But if you have the right people who play off each other, you don't feel like you have to sit in the back of the room and shut up. You feel like you have more of a voice," says Stephen Kafoury, a House freshman in 1973 who now works as a lobbyist.

Blumenauer, now a five-term congressman from the state House class of 1973, says his class helped pass, or at least debated, landmark legislation. And through his long public career, "Nothing quite matches that sense of excitement and possibility," he says. "It helped define the decade, and it helped define and set markers that still make a difference for Oregon today."

His advice to today's first-year class: "It's OK to take some risks. Push the envelope a bit."

As a group, the 1973 freshmen were younger and perhaps hungrier to make a mark. The men and women of this year's class are more experienced. They've served on school boards, county commissions, city councils, and as board members for civic and volunteer groups.

But they still have a lot to learn about how things work in Salem.

Newcomers, says Rep. Bob Jenson, "tend to think that their relative worth as a legislator is relative to the number of bills they introduce. I submit that the more important thing is not how many bills you introduce, but how many bills you help work through." Jenson, a Republican from Pendleton, is the senior member of the House in this session.

For the record, the 2007 House freshmen have sponsored or co-sponsored more than 1,100 bills so far. On average, returning members lend their name to fewer bills.

Several freshmen admit there is a steep learning curve.

"It's like when you have your first baby," says Rep. Sara Gelsler, D-Corvallis. "You think you know what to expect. But you really have no idea until you get the baby home."

Gelsler confesses that she introduced one bill she decided not to pursue. She forgot to tell the committee chair, however. And she didn't notice it had been posted for a hearing until staff came looking for her to testify.

Some mistakes have been embarrassingly public.

Rep. Tina Kotek, D-Portland, asked her partner to sit with her on the floor the day the House passed legislation prohibiting discrimination against gays and lesbians and permitting domestic partnerships. A few days later, Republicans called for an investigation.

Kotek had violated House rules, they said, because her partner, Aimee Wilson, is a registered lobbyist representing Oregon public employee unions. Lobbyists are not allowed inside the chamber when the House is in floor session.

Kotek stood and apologized. "I had no intention of violating House rules," she said. "Chalk it up to freshman exuberance on a very important day for my family."

Quick studies, the freshmen have learned a few lessons about politics -- such as focusing on the office they hold rather than getting too chatty about future ambitions.

"My ambition is to be elected to the House and serve my constituents," says Rep. Ben Cannon, a Democrat from Portland, who at age 30 is the youngest member of the House.

They've also learned not to burn relationships. In the end, the two freshman Republicans decided against signing onto the letter chiding colleagues for excessive partisanship. Though draft copies of the letter included the names of the two Republican freshmen, the final copy circulated was signed by only the 10 Democrats.

"I was advised this could be used against you," says Rep. Ron Maurer, R-Grants Pass.

How so?

"I don't know," he says. "I'm a freshman."

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