

Buck Stops Here

Sum
5/19/74

For a state bureaucrat who failed to justify a budget request at a hearing, Sen. Charles H. "Buck" Smelser could be the "meanest man on the face of the earth," as one reporter once jokingly referred to him.

But for a constituent seeking help on a personal problem or a legislative matter, Mr. Smelser couldn't be more attentive or courtly — or caring. As a result, Senator Smelser, who represents a portion of western Howard County and half of neighboring Carroll and Frederick counties, has long enjoyed a reputation as one of the most admired lawmakers in the State House.

Last week, the 73-year-old Mr. Smelser announced that he would not run for an eighth Senate term, which means the General Assembly is losing one of its most principled conservative members. During his seven terms as a Democratic senator and two as a delegate, Mr. Smelser brought a fiercely independent, non-ideological, common-sense approach to government. He was the embodiment of the citizen-legislator — a farmer for nine months, a legislator for three.

The Union Bridge native was a fiscal conservative long before it was politically popular. He never worried about polls or the national ideological ebb

and flow. When it came to deciding public policy, Mr. Smelser followed his conscience.

While he had a great deal of skepticism about many government programs, he was always able to support the spending that did the most good for the state. As head of the Senate Budget Committee's subcommittee on capital improvements, he made sure that it approved important projects for Maryland — the ballpark at Camden Yards and the expansion of the Baltimore Convention Center — but quietly killed the most egregious pork and the less meritorious construction plans.

His straightforward manner attracted a number of unexpected political allies. Urban legislators who normally might have trouble relating to a dairy farmer/legislator representing a staunchly conservative district held him in great respect. Nearly all the governors with whom he served admired his direct approach.

In the back rooms, there was never doubt where Mr. Smelser stood on an issue. He didn't waste a lot of words, but would get right to the point.

The race for his Senate seat is now wide open, but his eventual successor will have trouble following the act of Buck Smelser, partly because it was no act at all.