

Bromwell rides Senate storm

■ **'Bluster':** *The flashy lawmaker survived his failed attempt to take over the chamber's presidency with most of his political power left intact.*

By JEFF BARKER

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Two months after plotting unsuccessfully to overthrow the state Senate president, Thomas L. Bromwell's influence and swagger remain largely intact, at least for now.

The Baltimore County bar owner's son hasn't lost any of the flamboyance befitting a senator who sports a gold ring the size of a walnut and who once — in 1992 — threatened in an expletive-laced tirade to "smack" a colleague who goaded him during a committee hearing.

Most important from a policy perspective, he wasn't stripped of his Finance Committee chairmanship in retribution by Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, as some of Bromwell's legislative allies had feared. The panel lost a little of its jurisdiction in a reshuffling of Senate committee purviews, but still oversees bills on such matters as health care, banking and insurance.

But something almost imperceptible has changed in the

world of the 51-year-old man most everyone still calls "Tommy." Bromwell's future in the Senate, where he has served since 1983 — where he says he practically grew up — seems not as limitless as it was before the failed coup.

He says he still dreams of leading the Senate, but accepts now that he probably won't ascend to the top spot as long as Miller is content to serve. He says the re-

volt, hatched about a month before the 90-day legislative session began Jan. 10, was ill-conceived.

"People were talking and making phone calls. My biggest mistake is I should have just said, 'Stop it, stop it.' But, you know, I've got an ego."

He says he'll consider other political options, including a run for Baltimore County executive in 2002 when C.A. Dutch Ruppberger steps down.

"If you take a look at the last six years, it's been great in Baltimore County, and Dutch has done a great job. I want to make sure that that continues," Bromwell says. "If I don't think that's going to happen with whoever might be his successor, yeah, I might run."

He's not sure when he'll decide. "I owe it to the Democratic Party and I owe it to potential candidates out there to let them know as soon as I can. If I wait too long, I lose. If I go too soon, I lose the muscle that I have down here."

Affection for the Senate

But his heart still seems to be in the Senate. His oversized ring is inscribed with his district number — the 8th — and the Maryland seal. The ring, given to him by his wife, Mary Pat, was formed from the melted-down remnants of his high school ring and other jewelry from his youth.

"It probably typifies me. It's big and gaudy and loud," he says.

His affection for the Senate — for raw politics — is a big reason why he turned down a lucrative state job last fall running the Injured Workers Insurance Fund. Miller, who says the two remain friends, was among those who had attended Bromwell's Senate going-away party before he changed his mind about the job.

"I love being a politician. I like the action," says Bromwell, a construction manager for a firm that provides Internet wiring services. "I always wanted to be in a band

when I was younger. My mother always said, 'Tommy wanted to be in show business and he couldn't get in, so he became a politician.'"

Bromwell's voice swells as he describes how his grandfather, Sam Bromwell, was a Senate page 48 years ago for Louis L. Goldstein, then the chamber's president.

"Wouldn't it be great," he says "if the grandson of the senior page of 1953 becomes the president of the Senate? That's a great god-damn American story."

But then he catches himself: "You know, I'm very reluctant to talk about the presidency of the Senate. You know, as long as Mike's there, Mike's there, as far as I'm concerned."

He says he apologized last month to Miller, who is in his 15th year as president and has a new Senate office building named for him. "I told the president, 'if I caused you any discomfort' — I've got to watch what words I use — I apologized for that."

But while the two remain friends, there is also some strain. "I think I'm a lot like him, and he's a lot like me. Mike and I have a love-hate relationship," Bromwell says.

His legislative allies believe there is plenty of reason for Bromwell to remain. They credit him with leading significant efforts in health care and patients' rights, including a law he championed requiring health insurers to pay for experimental treatments offered by researchers in clinical trials.

"Tommy's got a bluster to him, but he wants to do what's right," says Del. Michael E. Busch, an Anne Arundel County Democrat and chairman of the House Economic Matters Committee.

Critics question motives

But Bromwell's critics see his flashy style and prodigious fund raising — he has drawn heavily in the past from industries that his committee oversees — and question whether he's looking out mostly for himself. Few of his colleagues are willing to attack him publicly, which is testament to his committee's continued influence.

Saying that everyone should be part of the process, Bromwell isn't afraid to invite lobbyists into the room during the later stages of committee work sessions. Lobbyists also show up in droves at his fund-raisers. Kathleen S. Skullney, the former executive director of Common Cause/Maryland, once called Bromwell's fund raising "an astonishing perversion of the political process."

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"You have the Skullneys of this world — the Common Cause people — who say that 'he's raised the big money and they get the big favors,'" Bromwell says.

"But people come to my fundraisers for all different reasons. They want to come see who's there, they want to come because they've got great crab cakes, and then some of them come because they want to see me. And some of them come because I'm the chairman of Finance and they think, 'Hey, if I spend \$125 to see the chairman of Finance, you're going to vote for my bill.' "

There was a time, Bromwell says, when he wasn't as confident as he is now, or as popular.

He was 28 when he arrived in Annapolis as a member of the House in 1979, and says he used to slink out of the chamber when his bills came to the floor because he was afraid he'd embarrass himself during debate.

Thirteen years later, Bromwell began a memorable rant after former Sen. Julian L. Lapidés chided him for supporting an early retirement program for the Maryland State Police. "I was half a step away from slapping the hell out of him," Bromwell says.

Bromwell says he has matured since then, and that he hopes people will forgive him an occasional lapse in judgment.

"I have a great propensity for people liking me. I want people to like me. I think that comes out in my style. I want citizens to sit in that committee and not be nervous and not be intimidated," he says.

Unfortunately for Bromwell, no one will soon forget the Lapidés incident; it was captured on the committee's videotaping system.

"They play that at every legislative follies," Bromwell says, shaking his head.