

Bromwell and Balto. County?

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By BARRY RASCOVAR

FOR SOMEONE who shot off part of his foot even before the General Assembly opened its 2001 session, Tom Bromwell had a great 90 days in Annapolis.

The linebacker-sized Democrat from northeastern Baltimore County remains among the strongest legislative chairmen. He speaks his mind — forcefully — and yet knows how to get his bills passed and block those he dislikes.

He took the lead for the Senate on developing a program to help seniors pay for prescription drugs.

He railed against the lack of attention by the governor to other health-care problems. And Mr. Bromwell angrily, and loudly, denounced the governor's request for a new airplane. He voiced the irritation and fears of many colleagues who didn't have the political nerve to speak out.

Yet Mr. Bromwell's days in the Senate could be numbered.

He may have taken another step in that direction when he voted against the budget this session — a no-no that landed Senate Republicans in hot water with Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller.

That could give Mr. Miller one more reason to trim Mr. Bromwell's influence in 2002, just as he did this year.

Mr. Miller knows how to send a message. He knows how to strike back at disloyal politicians.

A coup attempt late last year against Mr. Miller by Mr. Bromwell's supporters backfired when word got back to the Senate president. Within days, Mr. Bromwell's votes vanished.

Some of the main conspirators, such as Sen. Gloria Lawiah of Prince George's County, lost leadership posts. Mr. Bromwell had to issue profuse apologies and pledge renewed allegiance.

He may hang on as Senate Finance Committee chairman for another year, but after the next election Mr. Bromwell could end up far removed for his old power post.

The Baltimore County senator loves his role in Annapolis and would like nothing better than to

move up. But his state career may have reached a dead end.

That's why he's talking about a run for Baltimore County executive. Mr. Bromwell's close ties to county legislators in Annapolis give him an edge. He has a bulging

bankroll in his re-election account for such a race, too.

He's got deep roots in eastern Baltimore County, where he and his family used to run the Bromwell Inn restaurant and tavern.

His politics are a curious blend of traditional Democratic liberalism and blue-collar conservatism that could play well.

The cast of characters lusting to succeed C. A. Dutch Ruppberger isn't compelling. The biggest threat, Judge James T. Smith Jr., is a former two-term county councilman with broad support among political insiders. He's well-liked and praised for his competence and temperament.

But Judge Smith hasn't been an active politician for 17 years. He's unknown to most voters.

He's knowledgeable about the workings of county government, though. And Mr. Smith could be a better fit for an executive role than Mr. Bromwell.

The senator also must overcome an image problem. He's got one foot in the reformers' camp and one foot in the old b'hoys camp.

For instance, one of the guiding lights in the failed coup was Maurice R. "Mo" Wyatt, a lobbyist and political operative for former Gov. Marvin Mandel who remains close to Mr. Bromwell.

That old b'hoys image was reinforced by finagling last fall to make Mr. Bromwell head of a quasi-governmental insurance company, with compensation approaching \$200,000. Mr. Bromwell has acted as political godfather of the Injured Workers Insurance Fund, shielding it from sweeping reforms, protecting top leaders and control-

ling board appointments.

Mr. Bromwell would certainly give Baltimore County assertive leadership. Much like Mr. Ruppberger, he doesn't duck tough issues. He's got great political contacts and a knack for finding sound compromises.

But would he be happy in the Towson executive suites, with a crisis every day, a new headache every hour and angry constituents demanding instant solutions?

And will voters take to a candidate who hasn't fully made the transition to 21st-century politics, who sometimes seems torn between his roots in old-style county politics and new-style governing?

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