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HEADLINE: Newcomers hold key posts; Bell and fresh leadership will guide new City Council

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BODY:

When the seven new members of the Baltimore City Council took their places last Monday, they came wielding a lot of influence and power.

Five of the newly elected council members chair influential committees and two others hold key positions on other committees. For many years, it was a council tradition to give the choice committee jobs to veteran council members and let the newcomers fend for themselves. In 1988, then-Council President Mary Pat Clarke touched off a mutiny among the veterans by breaking with tradition and giving a few key committee assignments to freshmen. Lawrence A. Bell III was one of those freshmen and now he serves as the newly elected Council President.

Mr. Bell's move rankles some veterans, but political observers say he has taken a bold gamble to carve out a power base. The council is split by a power struggle between Mr. Bell and Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke, and many veterans have voiced support for the mayor. Mr. Bell is clearly courting the support of the newcomers.

The newcomers are mostly young, bright and eager troops who were active in neighborhood politics before being elected to the council. Two of the new council members come from families with deep ties to city politics.

And though naysayers contend that the group knows next to nothing about how the council operates, that might turn out to be a plus in the long run. Many of the veterans are mired in old ideas and in some cases are more than willing to settle for the status quo.

For many years, the formula for a successful council member called for expeditiously handling constituent complaints, taking a walk on controversial issues and never challenging the mayor.

In recent years, the council has changed as younger members like Mr. Bell, Martin O'Malley, D-3rd, and Sheila Dixon, D-4th, jumped out front. They pushed agendas and forced the public and the Schmoke administration to see the council as more than just a Pothole Parliament.

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A few years ago, Mr. Bell pushed for the ouster of police Commissioner Edward V. Woods when the city's murder rate skyrocketed.

Mr. O'Malley showed plenty of chutzpah when filed a lawsuit after the Housing Authority board chairman ignored a subpoena to come before the council. The council wanted answers to questions surrounding a troubled \$ 25 million no-bid housing repair program.

The incoming council members are poised to follow in the tradition of Mr. Bell and Mr. O'Malley.

Set to serve as chairs of five of the most important committees are:

Joan Carter Conway, D-3rd, of Budget and Appropriations; Robert W. Curran, D-3rd, of Policy and Planning; Helen L. Holton, D-5th, of Economic Development; Keiffer J. Mitchell Jr., D-4th, of Education and Human Resources and Stephanie C. Rawlings, D-5th, of Judiciary.

In addition, Robert L. Douglass, D-2nd, is vice chair for Economic Development and Edward Reisinger, D-6th, is a sub-chair for Recreation and Parks.

Dr. Leneal Henderson, senior fellow the University of Baltimore's William Donald Schaefer Center of Public Policy, said the new council has "a good balance of veteran and novice" members, adding:

"I think that it would be wise for Mr. Bell as a gesture of political cooperation and bridge building to make the best possible outreach to the veteran members of the City Council. It is a connection of institutional memory and the need for change."

Ms. Conway, 44, spent three decades with Urban Services Agency reviewing budgets and grants. Last year she she ran for a seat in the 43rd legislative district of the House of Delegates but lost.

Mr. Curran, 45, took the seat vacated by his brother Mike Curran. Their father, Joseph, was a councilman in the 1940s who headed a influential Northwest Baltimore political machine. Mr. Curran's brother, J. Joseph Curran Jr., is the state attorney general.

Mr. Curran and Ms. Conway have formed an alliance with Mr. O'Malley, who acts as their adviser and mentor.

Ms. Holton, 35, is a certified public accountant from Greater West Hills. She owns her own business, Resource One Management. For the past seven years, she was the treasurer of the Black-Jewish Forum of Baltimore, and she was the treasurer of the National Political Congress of Black Women.

Mr. Mitchell, 27, just graduated from law school and comes from a well-known Baltimore political family.

Retired U.S. Rep. Parren J. Mitchell is his uncle and state Del. Clarence M. Mitchell IV is his cousin.

Ms. Rawlings, 25, is a recent University of Maryland Law School graduate. Five years ago, she was elected to the Democratic State Central Committee. Her father is Del. Howard "Pete" Rawlings, D-40th.

Currently Ms. Rawlings is studying for the bar, and if she passes she will be one of two lawyers in the council.

Mr. Reisinger, 45, and Mr. Douglass are former councilman. Mr. Reisinger was appointed to the council in 1990 after the death of William J. Myers, but failed to win re-election. Mr. Douglass sat on the council more than 20 years ago and also has served as a state senator.

Already the newcomers have weathered some political storms and have emerged mostly intact.

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Just after the primary when Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke and Mr. Bell were feeling members out about who would be in whom's camp, the newcomers stayed the course. In meetings with Mr. Bell and Mr. Schmoke -- and publicly -- most of the newcomers remained squarely in the middle.

And when the fight for council vice president became somewhat of an ugly battle between 4th District councilwomen Sheila Dixon and Agnes Welch, they were not caught in the middle as Mr. Bell and Mr. Schmoke lobbied them for Ms. Welch and Ms. Dixon respectively.

Though critics charge that these council members have too much power and too much of a learning curve, it seems that the newcomers are taking their positions in context.

"I don't see City Council as a place where big things are done in four years," Ms. Holton said. "But there are some things that can be done. And I think that this council will be different than in the past eight years and the leadership will be an example set forth for all others to emulate."

Robert Guy Matthews is a reporter for The Sun.

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