

Frosh Goes From Backbencher to 'Giant Killer'

Montgomery Senator's Promotion Gives New Life to Long-Stalled Democratic Efforts

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As one of the Maryland Senate's most liberal members, Democrat Brian E. Frosh shared a bond with his Republican colleagues. They were, like him, outsiders who fought the chamber's moderate leaders from the political fringes.

"He used to buck the Senate leadership," Sen. Alexander X. Mooney (R-Frederick) said with an air of nostalgia. "Now he *is* the Senate leadership."

Long one of the state's most respected, if marginalized, senators, the low-key Bethesda lawyer has seen his fortunes shift dramatically with the changes in Annapolis this year. At age 56 and after 16 years in office, he has emerged as a powerful liberal foil to the new Republican administration. It's a role that crystallized last week when he led the fight to reject Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s nominee for environmental secretary.

"It makes him the giant killer," said Del. John A. Hurson (D-Montgomery). "It raises his profile and, with it, the profile of all of the progressive Democrats in Annapolis."

At the same time, Frosh's law firm has planted itself at the center of controversy in Montgomery

County, signing on to represent Police Chief Charles A. Moose, who is awaiting a decision from the Ethics Commission about the propriety of his plans to sell the story of his role in last fall's sniper manhunt. (Frosh himself will not be involved in any possible legal action against the county.)

Frosh said the newfound stature is nothing he's been craving.

"I'm not even sure I'm willing to concede that I have all this additional clout," he said, smiling. "I suppose I would agree, being a [Senate committee] chairman has inherent powers and abilities that other folks don't have. That has given me an additional edge."

It's an edge he's using to full effect, advancing an agenda that includes a number of environmental causes. In the past, he fought efforts by oil companies to drill in the Chesapeake Bay, challenged Gov. William Donald Schaefer (D) to back more stringent recycling laws, and helped champion Gov. Parris N. Glendening's (D) "smart growth" initiatives.

But he entered those fights from the Senate's back benches, using a gentle brand of persuasion and a command of the facts to corral votes. That changed this year, after Senate President Thomas V. Mike

Miller Jr. (D-Prince George's) promoted Frosh to one of the body's four coveted committee chairmanships.

"I'm no longer an outsider," Frosh said. "But all that means is I have different tools to work with. Instead of taking on a bad bill by throwing bombs at it on the floor, maybe now I can duck back into committee and quietly slit the throat of a bad bill."

Miller said recently that he promoted Frosh to reflect Montgomery County's growing presence in the Senate, not to push the chamber's political profile leftward.

But there is mounting evidence that Frosh's rise could have precisely that effect.

Signs of a shift are especially evident in the Judicial Proceedings Committee, where Frosh replaced former chairman Walter Baker (D-Cecil), a folksy rural Democrat who frustrated advocates of traditionally liberal causes, such as gay rights and gun control.

Frosh's ascension has brought new life to several measures long stuck on the Democratic to-do list, including legislation debated last week that would change the standard of proof in capital murder cases and a moratorium on the death penalty, which for the first

time won Judicial Proceedings Committee approval.

But it was Frosh's stewardship of the Lynn Buhl issue that has done the most to move him into the spotlight. After the Senate's Executive Nominations Committee urged that Buhl be rejected, Miller tapped Frosh to broker a deal with Ehrlich. Frosh proposed a compromise: Pull Buhl's name off the Senate floor, allowing her to serve for a year on a kind of probation. Ehrlich could then resubmit her name for confirmation when the Senate convenes next January.

Frosh also produced a list of demands on behalf of the environmental community, including concessions on policy and personnel matters. Ehrlich rejected the offer. His spokesman said Frosh was "asking for things that aren't possible."

But Frosh's Democratic colleagues stood with him, saying they felt the demands were reasonable, given all that Ehrlich stood to lose.

And Frosh's opponents could only convey their frustration as the vote went against them.

"I think it's a sign that the Senate leadership has changed," Mooney said. "Just look at who's calling the shots."