

Frosh assumes leadership role in high-profile Senate fights

He focuses on Buhl fight, death penalty moratorium

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Suddenly, at the close of each morning's Senate session, the reporters are lining up at the front-row desk of Brian E. Frosh, hanging on every word uttered by the longtime Montgomery County legislator.

They want to know if he has the votes to defeat the governor's nominee for secretary of the environment. They want to know if the Democrat is willing to make a deal with the governor. They want to know if the death penalty moratorium he's championing will survive a Senate floor debate.

"It's gotten a little too interesting," says the 56-year-old Frosh with a laugh.

Colleagues have known Frosh to be a big environmentalist, an always passionate advocate working behind the scenes for clean air and water and more. But this year, he joined the Senate leadership as chairman of the high-profile Judicial Proceedings Committee.

And last week Frosh found himself staring down the governor in a fight to keep Lynn Y. Buhl from becoming environmental secretary and taking the lead in a battle to halt executions in the state.

Leadership void

The confluence of events is teaching the idealist and persuasive litigator that his liberal voice is an influential one, as he becomes a power broker to be reckoned with in Annapolis. He is slipping into the progressive leadership void created with the departure of the left-leaning Gov. Parris N. Glendening.

Even Frosh's rivals sound like his cheerleaders.

"Brian Frosh is one of the most formidable opponents you could take on," said Senate Mi-

nority Leader J. Lowell Stoltzfus, who represents the Eastern Shore. "He's bright. He's an attorney. He's personable.

"He is leading the opposition and he is genuine. I think he obviously believes in his heart Lynn Buhl would be a mistake."

Frosh is characteristic of Montgomery County — well-educated (a graduate of Montgomery County's public schools, with a bachelor's degree from Wesleyan University and a law degree from Columbia University), socially active (his resume is stacked with environmental and Jewish causes), a family man (he is the father of two and the son of a former judge) and a serious student of policy.

Politics has always consumed him. He was living in New Mexico in 1980 and said he was disgusted to find no one cared as much as he did that the conservative actor Ronald Reagan had been elected president and that Republicans had taken over the U.S. Senate. He moved back East to find partners for those lively political conversations and to run for elected office.

He lost his first bid for the Maryland Senate in 1982 by about 500 votes. In 1986, he shot instead for the House of Delegates and won an open seat. He was elected to the Senate in 1994.

Frosh's wit and smarts can make him imposing. He often debates without notes and is well-schooled in every bill coming out of his committee. In the Buhl confirmation hearing, he asked piercing questions, blowing holes in her case for the job.

When reorganizing the Senate leadership last year, Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller said he immediately thought Frosh would be perfect to head Judicial Proceedings, the committee Miller once led.

'Someone brighter'

A moderate Democrat from a rural district who disagrees with Frosh on the death penalty and slots legislation, Miller still has faith in the liberal from suburban Washington.

"I said, 'Brian, you've got the type of demeanor and intellect we need on the front row,'" Miller recalled. "I always try to pick someone brighter than myself."

Miller said Frosh is poised to become a star who could prove himself a major power broker.

But Miller cautions that Frosh still must prove he can in-

teract with the Senate's array of personalities and political stances, learning to make compromises sometimes in the name of the political game.

Frosh's first test could be coming now. He hasn't been willing to compromise on the Buhl nomination. Though still willing to talk, he said he isn't sure there is anything Ehrlich can offer him to change his vote and stop lobbying his friends and younger committee members to follow his lead.

Buhl isn't qualified, he repeated, and is too quick to change her positions. He has even offered Ehrlich a few names of Republicans who would be palatable to him in that position.

"As far as I'm concerned, this one is on the merits," Frosh said. "As far as they're concerned, this is a game.

"People [in the administration] keep saying to me: What do you want? What I really want is a good secretary of the Department of the Environment."

Erin M. Fitzsimmons, a member of the board of directors for the Maryland League of Conservation Voters Education Fund, said she worked with Frosh last year as he helped push through landmark legislation to protect the state's coastal bays from development.

"He can put it into plain language," she said. "That is a really special skill not a lot of people have."

Committee changes

Of all Senate committees, Judicial Proceedings has probably changed more than others this year. Under Sen. Walter M. Baker, a conservative from the Eastern Shore, debate was often stilted and bills Baker didn't like often wouldn't make it to a vote.

Sen. Nancy Jacobs, a Harford County Republican who sits on the committee, remembers Frosh appearing before the committee last year to testify on a bill. The terse Baker tried to limit Frosh's testimony.

"Brian said, 'Mr. Chairman, this is an important piece of legislation,'" Jacobs recalled. "But the chairman hit his gavel and said, 'One minute.'"

Frosh, though, has been known to let his committee drag into the evening to ensure that everyone who wants to speak gets the chance.

"I have the utmost respect for him," said Jacobs, who tangled with Frosh on the Senate floor over the death penalty moratorium.

"He is a great chairman and a tough competitor. He is liberal and I am conservative, but he is fair."