

'I'm trying to change the leadership ...'

Leon Billings' lonely quest

*Liberal delegate
wants to oust
conservative
House speaker*

by Josh Kurtz

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Del. Leon G. Billings is raising the stakes in his crusade to show that the leadership in the House of Delegates is far to the right of the Democratic rank-and-file. And he is hoping enough of his fellow Democrats get the message and consider overthrowing Speaker of the House Casper R. Taylor Jr.

In a "Dear Colleague" letter sent to select legislators last week, Billings (D-Dist. 18) of Kensington released a chart showing all 141 delegates' votes on 19 key bills during the 1998 legislative session. He then graded each member, based on how often they voted the "right way" — in the liberal Billings' view.

The Billings test includes votes on abortion funding, environmental initiatives, English-only legislation, government funding for private schools, subsidies for the horse racing industry and anti-tobacco measures.

"You may find it helpful to have this record for your own purposes," Billings wrote his colleagues. "You may want to share it with Democrats who are challenging Republicans. Or you may simply want to consign it to the round file."

Billings is not shy about his intentions, however. His chief reason for compiling the list is to show how frequently House leaders — from Taylor on down — vote against the wishes of the majority of House Democrats.

"I'm trying to change the leadership ... to get a Democrat elected as speaker," he said.

Nowhere in the letter or in the accompanying report does Billings tell his colleagues that Taylor and his lieutenants must go.

"It's sort of early," he said. "The key is to see whether or not a significant bloc of Democrats in the House want to make a change [after the November elections]."

But Billings is hoping his analysis has some "shock value" and gets some members thinking.

House Majority Leader John A. Hurson (D-Dist. 18) of Chevy Chase, a friend of Billings and a close adviser of Taylor, called the Billings list "interesting," but said Billings is paying too much attention to Taylor's personal politics.

"The thing you have to remember is that leadership is not one person," Hurson said. "The Democratic leadership in the House has tried to balance the liberal and conservative wings in the party."

The 14-member leadership team under Taylor, (D-Dist. 1) of Cumberland, includes the majority leader, the speaker pro tem, the majority whip, the parliamentarian, the six committee chairmen and chairmen of influential joint committees.

Collectively, the 100 House Democrats scored 66.9 percent — meaning they voted with Billings 66.9 percent of the time. But the 14 House leaders had a 52.4 percent score. That's precisely the score of the full House, which includes the votes of 41 Republicans.

Billings' scores of the leadership ranged from Environmental Affairs Committee Chairman Ronald A. Guns (D-Dist. 36) of Elkton (6) to Parliamentarian Pauline H. Menes (D-Dist. 21) of College Park (95). Taylor's score was 37. Hurson's was 89.

John F. Wood Jr. (D-Dist. 29A) of Mechanicsville, the acting chairman of the Commerce and Government Matters Committee, scored a 17. Majority Whip George W. Owings III (D-Dist. 27B) of Chesapeake Beach scored a 24. Speaker Pro Tem Thomas E. Dewberry (D-Dist. 47B) of Catonsville scored a 25.

Republicans voted the Billings way 17.2 percent of the time. Don B. Hughes (R-Dist. 37A) of Salisbury scored the highest, with a 44. Mathew J. Mossburg (R-Dist. 39) of Laytonsville and David R. Brinkley (R-Dist. 4A) of New Market, ran up zeros.

Collectively, the Montgomery County delegation scored a 66. County Democrats scored a 85.5, and county Republicans scored a 19.5.

"This is an interesting way of looking at things, but it's just one way of looking at things," Hurson said. "This is a listing of Leon's votes. This is a listing of Leon's issues. If you had a listing of George Owings' issues, it would look a lot different."

But Minority Leader Robert H. Kittleman (R-Dist. 14B) of West Friendship said he has also compiled a list of House votes for Republican challengers and incumbents to use, and it's similar to Billings'. Only the conclusions, he said, are different.

"I think it more likely would help Republicans," Kittleman said of the Billings list.

And Mossburg is delighted that he failed Billings' test.

"It's a badge of honor," Mossburg said. "He's scored zero on my list, too."

Still, the broader question is whether Billings will actually be able to use the votes to mount a challenge against Taylor and his leadership team. A maverick since he entered the House in 1991, Billings spent a good part of this legislative session writing poison pen notes about what he perceived to be the conservative tendencies of the leadership.

He was not alone. In the final days of the session, James W. Hubbard (D-Dist. 23) of Bowie, another liberal renegade who has endorsed Gov. Parris N. Glendening for re-election, fumed that Taylor and his lieutenants were conspiring to make Glendening look bad. He, too, talked openly of trying to find someone to challenge Taylor for the speakership before the 1999 session begins.

In the House, a cadre of about 20 liberal Democrats frequently oppose the leadership on economic matters — tax cuts, social spending and so forth. But some are more independent than others, and they all know the score: Too much independence can lead to bad committee assignments and killed bills.

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"You never know when the leadership controls the positions of 40 or 50 members, whether the disaffected will go along," Billings admitted.

Adrienne A. Mandel (D-Dist. 19) of Silver Spring, who got a perfect score on Billings' list, said she had few complaints about House leaders.

"It has always been my experience that they are willing to listen to different points of view," she said. "I have never encountered a brick wall."

But Mandel said she hoped leadership would become "more inclusive" next year — and particularly by welcoming more Montgomery County lawmakers into the fold.

Hurson said Taylor and his team aren't worried about Billings' voting list.

"Is it a convincing case for changes in leadership?" Hurson asked. "I don't think so."

As for Billings, he isn't suggesting that he would be a good candidate for speaker, but he isn't worried about reprisals should he become involved in a coup attempt that fails. He already sits farther away from Taylor than anyone else in the House chamber — in a seat, Billings likes to point out, that was occupied by Taylor himself before he became speaker in 1994.

"If Cas could move Leon even further back in the chamber — like maybe behind the wall — he would," one colleague mused.

Leon's List

With 19 votes from the 1998 General Assembly session as a litmus test, Del. Leon G. Billings has compiled a rating sheet for all 141 House members. He rates them from left-to-right. The higher the score, the more liberal the lawmaker. Billings' list uses votes on abortion funding, environmental initiatives, English-only legislation, government funding for private schools, subsidies for the horse racing industry and anti-tobacco measures, among others.

REPUBLICANS

Robert C. Baldwin	Crowsville	21
Raymond Beok	Danwood	26
Phillip D. Bissett	Edgewater	21
David B. Brinkley	New Market	0
Michael E. Burns	Glen Burnie	11
Bartle B. Clibbert	Gaithersburg	24
Jean B. Cryor	Potomac	33
Adelaide C. Eckardt	Campagne	4
George C. Edwards	Grantsville	22
Donald B. Elliott	New Windsor	8
Patricia A. Faulkner	Silver Spring	35
Robert L. Flanagan	Columbia	11
Joseph M. Getty	Manchester	24
Janel Greenip	Crofton	5
James M. Harkins	Forest Hill	11
Kenneth C. Holt	Baltimore	6
Don B. Hughes	Salisbury	44
Thomas E. Hutchins	La Plata	5
Nancy Jacobs	Edgewood	12
A. Wade Kach	Cockeysville	28
James M. Kelly	Towson	25
Robert H. Kittleman	West Friendship	11
Martha S. Kilma	Lutherville	5
Richard A. La Vay	Potomac	1
John R. Leopold	Pasadena	16
Charles A. McCleanahan	Granfield	1
Robert A. McKee	Hagerstown	16
John S. Morgan	Ladysburg	21
Mathew J. Mossburg	Laytonsville	0
Donald F. Murphy	Baltimore	11
Anthony J. O'Donnell	Lusby	11
James F. Ports Jr.	Perry Hall	16
Alfred W. Redmer Jr.	Perry Hall	24
James E. Rzepkowiak	Pasadena	14
Victoria L. Schade	Pasadena	16
Kenneth D. Schisler	Easton	12
Louise V. Snodgrass	Frederick	11
Nancy R. Stocksdale	Westminster	5
Paul S. Stull	Walkersville	18
J. Anita Stup	Frederick	32
Mary Roe Walkup	Elkton	21

DEMOCRATS

Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr.	Dumfries	87
John S. Arnlick	Dundalk	25
Rushern L. Baker III	Chesver	94
Wheeler R. Baker	Grasonville	22
Kumar P. Barve	Gaithersburg	84
Joanne C. Benson	Landover	94
Leon G. Billings	Kensington	100
Elizabeth Bobo	Columbia	100
Ross Mark Burton	Beltsville	28
Frank D. Boston Jr.	Baltimore	60
Bennett Bosman	Baltimore	35
Talmadge Branch	Baltimore	70
Ernest G. Burns Jr.	Emmetsburg	85
Michael E. Busch	Annapolis	63
Joan Cadden	Bowie Park	35
James W. Campbell	Baltimore	83
Virginia P. Clagen	West River	74
Michael Comeau	Jarrettsville	39
Mary A. Conroy	Bowie	58
Norman H. Conway	Salisbury	18
Michael A. Crumlin	Middleburg	37
Clarence Davis	Baltimore	70
Darrell Davis	Kennett	88
Diane DeCarlo	Middle River	16
Dana L. Dembrow	Silver Spring	69
Thomas E. Dewberry	Catonsville	25
Michael Dobson	Baltimore	76
John P. Donoghue	Hagerstown	35
Ann Marie Doory	Baltimore	72
Cornell N. Dypski	Baltimore	68
Nathaniel Eym	Beltsville	30
Michael J. Finifter	Owings Mills	84
John P. Flinn	Frederick	1
Robert L. Frank	Relserstown	79
Richard A. Gans	Beltsville	1
Tony E. Fulton	Baltimore	76
Gilbert V. Gonn	Baltimore	1
Marilyn R. Goldwater	Bethesda	89
Michael P. Gordon	Kensington	100
Sharon M. Grosfeld	Kensington	100
Ronald A. Guns	Elkton	6
Peter A. Hammen	Baltimore	80
Hattie N. Harrison	Baltimore	67
Anne Healey	Hyattsville	71
Sue Hecht	Frederick	61
Henry B. Heller	Rockville	84
Shella Ellis Hixson	Silver Spring	74
Carolyn J.B. Howard	Landover	74
James W. Hubbard	Bowie	69
Brenda Hughes	Capitol Heights	84

Cont

Cheryl Chase		89
Adrienne Jones	Baltimore	94
Cheryl C. Kagan	Rockville	84
Ruth M. Kirk	Baltimore	83
Katherine Klauemeler	Baltimore	42
Nancy K. Kopp	Bethesda	84
Carolyn J. Krysiak	Baltimore	72
Samuel C. Linton	Nanjemoy	0
Mary Ann Love	Glen Burnie	47
James E. Malone Jr.	Baltimore	37
Adrienne A. Mandel	Silver Spring	100
Sallma Siler Marriott	Baltimore	84
Brian K. McHale	Baltimore	81
Maggie L. McIntosh	Baltimore	84
Pauline H. Menes	College Park	95
Ellen Wills-Miller	Westminster	71
Joseph J. Minnick	Dundalk	15
Clarence M. Mitchell IV	Baltimore	78
Van T. Mitchell	La Plata	29
Brian Moe	West Laurel	75
Jacob J. Mohorovic	Dundalk	47
Kenneth C. Montague Jr.	Baltimore	74
Dan K. Morhalm	Owings Mills	82
Timothy D. Murphy	Baltimore	63
C. Anthony Muse	Fort Washington	83
Shirley Nathan-Pulliam	Baltimore	94
Nathaniel T. Oaks	Baltimore	100
Clay C. Opara	Baltimore	57
George W. Owings III	Chesapeake Beach	24
Richard A. Palumbo	Greenbelt	45
Oble Patterson	Oxon Hill	94
Shane Pendergrass	Columbia	95
Marsha G. Perry	Crofton	67
Carol S. Petzold	Rockville	94
Robert Pitkin	Bowie	68
D. Bruce Poole	Hagerstown	39
Pauline Preiss	Bel Air	68
James E. Proctor Jr.	Brandywine	68
Robert P. Rawlings	Baltimore	68
Samuel I. Rosenberg	Baltimore	84
Robert D. Rudolph	Flaming Sun	68
Mark K. Shriver	Bethesda	84
Robert F. Slade III	Leonardtown	64
Frank S. Turner	Columbia	95
Robert M. Valderrama	Oxon Hill	68
Joseph F. Vallarolo Jr.	Upper Marlboro	56
Theresa Watson	Baltimore	100
Michael H. Weir	Baltimore	11
John F. Wood Jr.	Mechanicsville	17
Betty Workman	Cumberland	63