

Taylor gets good marks after 1st year as House speaker

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As midnight neared on the closing day of the 1994 legislative session, House Speaker Casper Taylor abruptly cut off a delegate trying to debate a bill. It was one of the few times the affable Allegany County Democrat wielded a quick gavel.

In his first year as speaker, Mr. Taylor got high marks from many delegates for bringing a new air of openness to House debates. He also was praised by many, but not all, delegates for bringing a more democratic style of leadership to the House.

Both attributes were viewed as a welcome change from Mr. Taylor's predecessor, R. Clayton Mitchell, who was often criticized as an autocrat who imposed rigid discipline on the House.

"The best measure of Cas is that no one ... has indicated they would rather have his predecessor over him," said Del. Leon Billings, D-Montgomery.

"His gavel's not so fast. He's not trying to be unceasingly dictatorial," said Mr. Billings, a House maverick who often tangled with Mr. Mitchell.

Del. Paulene Menes, D-Prince George's, a House member for 28 years, said she was "very, very pleased" with the new speaker.

"I always thought too many important things were kept in the hands of a

few who were in leadership, who were the favored friends of the speaker. Under Cas' leadership, the process has been opened up," she said.

But Mr. Taylor already has his critics, although they aren't willing to go public with their complaints out of fear of retribution if Mr. Taylor is re-elected speaker in 1995.

One Democratic delegate who was often critical of Mr. Mitchell said Mr. Taylor began as a consensus builder, but became more dictatorial as the session wore on.

"I didn't change. I've been me all along," Mr. Taylor said. "I ran the House the same way I ran the Economic

Matters Committee."

Mr. Taylor said he tries to involve as many people as possible in the decision making process. He said every House member has a right to speak and be heard.

The speaker said that is why there was more debate on the House floor this year. It may also explain why there were some breaks in the vaunted House committee system this year.

Under the system, committee decisions are virtually always upheld when bills are brought to the floor for debate. But five bills approved by committees were defeated this year, and five amendments opposed by House leaders

were added to other bills.

Many delegates welcomed the small ray of democracy. Others said it could lead to a breakdown of the committee system, creating chaos and making it difficult for the 141-member House to do its work in 90 days each year.

"The House is headed down the drain under this guy," said one longtime House member who asked not to be identified.

House Minority Leader Ellen Sauerbrey of Baltimore County said she saw improvements in the way Mr. Taylor ran House sessions. "We haven't seen roll call requests cut off like Clay (Mitchell) used to do. Debate has been more tolerated," she said.

But Mrs. Sauerbrey said despite Mr. Taylor's more democratic style, "I have not been happy with the way a number of issues were ramrodded through."

Several delegates said Mr. Taylor was obviously trying to keep everybody happy this year because he wants to be re-elected speaker in 1995.

With a new governor and big changes in House membership next year, nothing is certain, said Del. D. Bruce Poole, former majority leader who was demoted by Mr. Taylor.

But Mr. Poole said that "the presumption is he gets re-elected."