

For State House Speaker, a Change of Focus

Taylor's 'One Maryland' Vision Shuns Partisanship to Seek More Common Ground

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Del. Casper R. Taylor Jr. has long been counted among the state's most conservative Democratic leaders. The speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates has been a friend to business and gun owners and a steadfast foe of abortion.

So something seemed out of kilter this week when the legislature convened with Taylor speaking out in favor of a gas tax and gay rights. And his traditional allies reached the verge of worry when he seemed to suggest that they skip waging the annual fight over abortion.

"Obviously Cas is catering to the liberal side of the party," said Del. James F. Ports Jr. (R-Baltimore County), who is beginning his ninth year in the House. "I was surprised to hear the inference to sexual orientation and abortion. The House has tried to pull him to the left, and they've succeeded to some extent."

Not so, insists Taylor, his core beliefs are intact. But he's weary of the annual abortion debate that underscores the deep divide in his flock of 141 legislators and undermines his determined effort to find common ground.

In the interest of harmony—a concept he calls "One Maryland"—Taylor wants to prevent an anticipated battle over a proposed ban on a late-term procedure known as "partial-birth" abortion from leading to a broader debate over whether abortion itself is legal.

"Everyone in this room is tired of talking about, and fighting about" abortion, Taylor, 64, said last week. "I look for the day when we can all rise above arguing whether the procedure is legal, because it is legal."

Abortion is as divisive in Maryland as it is elsewhere. In 1992, voters affirmed abortion rights in a statewide referendum. And every year since, there has been some

sort of debate in the legislature about whether to restrict taxpayer-funded abortions. This year, the Senate appears to have the votes to pass a ban on the late-term procedure because two abortion-rights Republicans lost reelection bids to antiabortion candidates.

And that's why House members were so interested in Taylor's comments.

"Those who were pro-life thought he was changing his position, and those who support abortion thought he was on their side," said Del. Thomas E. Dewberry, Taylor's chief deputy in House leadership and an advocate of outlawing the late-term procedure.

Taylor bristles at the suggestion that he could be co-opted by anyone.

"Nothing has changed in me," said Del. Taylor said. "I will go to my death opposed to abortion. But I have reached the conclusion that we are never going to solve this problem by civil law. You cannot legislate people into either doing something they flat out refuse to do, or not doing something that they are personally compelled and committed to do."

If a bill can be crafted that outlaws the procedure and does not otherwise infringe on a woman's right to an abortion, Taylor said he would sign on to it. But he insists that he won't force his will on any member of the House.

"I was very sincerely sharing the best I have in me to make everyone in this institution think in the most global way about all these important issues," said Taylor, of Allegany, the first Western Marylander in a century to lead the House. "For anyone to characterize these kinds of issues as being a liberal Democratic issue or a conservative Republican issue is horribly insulting."

If he is to forge his colleagues into One Maryland, Taylor knows that sort of partisan thinking must be minimized.

First elected to the House in 1974, Taylor has presided over the sometimes raucous elected body for five years, trying to bridge the gap between the desires of city and suburban legislators and resolving differences between those who represent rural and urban areas.

Maryland's citizen legislature convenes for 90 days each year, bringing together conservatives and liberals, doctors and lawyers, homemakers and schoolteachers. Taylor frets that they become mired in their own interests and in protecting those of their districts.

He wants them to get behind broader, statewide interests. As part of that effort, he sponsors a five-day tour that takes new members across the state.

Peacemaker, coalition builder and champion of diversity seem unlikely roles for the delegate from

an Appalachian mountain region that is 97 percent white, poor and conservative on most social issues. But Taylor has a track record that defies convention.

In 1995, he appointed Elijah E. Cummings, of Baltimore, now a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, as the first African American speaker pro tempore of the Maryland House of Delegates. Taylor also has made a point of including more women in his leadership team.

This year, he is supporting Democratic Gov. Parris N. Glendening's proposal to outlaw housing and employment discrimination against gay men and women. It's not an easy issue given his Catholic rearing and conservative district, but Taylor says, "You can love the sinner and hate the sin."

And he's trying to build support for tax breaks and a new loan fund

for six jurisdictions—including Baltimore and Allegany—with chronically high unemployment and illiteracy rates and little infrastructure to help attract new jobs.

"If we are tolerant and care about One Maryland," Taylor said this week, "aren't we willing to step in as neighbors and do the fundamentally right thing to give those six jurisdictions the right to participate in the glory of One Maryland?"