

MIRS Capitol Capsule, Wednesday, October 17, 2007

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"That's how they used to do it in the U.S.S.R."

— Bill **RUSTEM**, of Public Sector Consultants, commenting on how Michigan's public policy seems to be driven more and more by political parties.

Power Of Party Chairs At Generational High Point

Call it term limits, call it the power of the personalities, but some Lansing observers are suggesting the chairs of the Michigan Republican and Democratic parties may be the strongest in modern Michigan political history.

Some are even questioning if the parties have become too strong.

"It's a question of who is working for whom?" asked Bill **RUSTEM**, president of Public Sector Consultants. "In the past, the parties were working to get their candidates elected and the policy decisions were left to the office holders. Now it appears that policy is being directed by the party."

Rustem made his comments following the budget battle of September, when Michigan Republican Party (MRP) Chair Saul **ANUZIS** exerted enormous pressure on GOP legislators. The pressure reached a point where some lawmakers were complaining it was interfering with their ability to come to a balanced budget agreement.

The observation also comes as Mark **BREWER**, chair of the Michigan Democratic Party, battles inside the party over the proposed Jan. 15 state-sponsored, dual-party presidential primary. Brewer, who's made it clear he supports a caucus over a primary, could possibly inform the state on Nov. 14 that the party isn't interested in playing ball on the 15th — despite interest in keeping the primary going from key party members, including National Committeewoman Debbie **DINGELL**, U.S. Sen. Carl **LEVIN** (D-Detroit), U.S. Sen. Debbie **STABENOW** (D-Lansing) and Gov. Jennifer **GRANHOLM**.

"There's a line that's been crossed," Rustem said. "That's [policy directed by party] how they used to do it in the U.S.S.R."

During the budget battle, Anuzis made it clear that Republicans don't vote for tax increases.

The political advantage from an electoral standpoint was to leave it to the Democrats to vote for revenue increases. At least for the use tax expansion to services in the House, that was accomplished. However, two Republican lawmakers, former House Minority Floor Leader Chris **WARD** (R-Brighton) and Rep. Ed **GAFFNEY** (R-Grosse Pointe Farms), voted for the income tax hike. In the Senate, three GOP members voted for the Income Tax hike — Sens. Gerald **VAN WOERKOM** (R-Muskegon), Tom **GEORGE** (R-Kalamazoo), and Ron **JELINEK** (R-Three Oaks). Three voted for the use tax expansion to services — Jelinek, Sen. Wayne **KUIPERS** (R-Holland) and Sen. Valde **GARCIA** (R-Howell)).

Following those votes, Anuzis (through a spokesperson) made it clear that the party's interest in participating in recall elections pertains only to the recall of Democratic lawmakers for "yes" votes on the tax hike — not defending vulnerable GOP districts held by Republicans like George or Van Woerkom.

"If Van Woerkom or George got recalled, Republicans could lose those seats in a special

election," notes *Inside Michigan Politics* Editor Bill [BALLENGER](#).

Ballenger agreed the current party chairs might be exercising more power than chairs from the last several decades. The key to remember in the budget battle is that it's a matter of principal for Anuzis.

"If you're Anuzis and you're standing on principal and you believed that taxes didn't need to be raised and Republicans sided with Democrats, why should the party devote resources to try to prop up these people?" he asked.

Ballenger insists it is a question of electing members and because it's electing members it's something that should be in the party's purview.

"They have got to concentrate on winning back control of the House — taking advantage of the recalls of Democrats," Ballenger said. "That's what they're really concerned about. It's kind of almost counter-intuitive — they'd be propping up their own members for doing the same [by defending recalled GOP members]."

Ballenger contended that Anuzis is able to exert more influence than past chairs in part because Democrats hold the Governor's office, and there isn't a powerful GOP legislator in the State House or Senate to play a leadership role. In essence, Anuzis is more powerful because he's an "out-party" chair. Ballenger noted that when Spencer **ABRAHAM** was chair of the party in the mid-1980s, he too was very influential, but he was essentially a "hand-maiden" to then-Senate Majority Leader John **ENGLER**, who was working as the GOP's governor in absentia.

Anuzis isn't anyone's "hand maiden" — he exerts more influence than Abraham once did — making him the most influential chair in modern Michigan history.

On the Democratic side, Ballenger said Brewer is the most powerful party chair probably going back to the service of Neil **STAEBLER**, who was party chair from 1950 to 1961. Known as "Mr. Democrat", Staebler later ran unsuccessfully for Governor in 1964.

Jerry **ROE**, former executive director of the Republican Party for 10 years during the a Gov. William **MILLIKEN** administration said for an out-party chairman, Anuzis is doing a good job and he agrees that he is one of the stronger Chairmen, but he didn't know if he'd go back much further than the early 1960s with that analysis.

"You've got to remember George **VAN PEURSEM**, when he was head of the MMA (Michigan Manufacturers Association) and chairman of the Republican Party. He ruled with an iron hand," Roe said.

Van Peursem was Chairman of the Michigan Republican Party from 1961 to 1963.

One former GOP chairman who spoke on background admitted that today, the current party chairs are "certainly more public about their power and influence" — but this chair also agreed that term limits aids that power.

"Their power becomes more outsized when the chairmen stay year after year and the elected officials turn over more frequently," the former chairman added.
