

## Virginia Doesn't Need Two Governors

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With the resignation of Speaker Vance Wilkins, members of the Virginia House of Delegates have an unprecedented opportunity. For the first time in House history, they have an interim speaker, Del. Lacey Putney, who as chairman of the Privileges and Elections Committee, was next in line for succession to the speakership. His temporary tenure, which expires in January, provides an ideal time to review the powers and duties of the speaker position. To most minds, the speaker is the second most powerful person in the commonwealth after the governor. Some people even suggest that the speaker, who can control the passage of legislation in the General Assembly, is more powerful than the governor.

The speaker appoints members to committees and can remove them at will. He (no she, so far) assigns bills to committees, controls debate on the floor of the House and approves members' expense reimbursements.

That's a lot of power – and a lot of opportunities to abuse that power. Members of both parties have horror stories about feeling the speaker's influence.

Republicans, for example, who were in the minority in the House until several years ago, have not-so-fond remembrances of E. Blackburn "Blackie" Moore, who was the speaker from 1950 to 1967. Moore, the legislative leader for the Democratic "Byrd Machine," which ran the state for decades, put Republicans and urban Democrats on committees that never met.

Vance Wilkins, who recently resigned as speaker, was taken off the Rules Committee by a Democratic speaker and clearly never forgot that action. When the Republicans took over the House, Democrats felt the brunt of Wilkins's new power. Two senior Democrats were removed from the Rules Committee minutes before a key vote to ensure that the speaker got his way and defeated a proposal – interestingly enough, from a Republican senator.

I led much of the debate in the House Appropriations Committee against Gov. Jim Gilmore's budget shenanigans; the speaker rewarded me by taking me off the committee. Just the threat of removal or banishment to an obscure committee often was enough to maintain discipline. When the Senate passed to the House a bill that would have provided for a sales tax referendum in Northern Virginia for education and transportation – a measure the speaker opposed – Wilkins engineered an adjournment to avoid almost certain passage of the bill.

The interim speakership will allow for frank discussions about this position, which simply embodies too much power for a single legislative leader. Democrat speakers have abused the post. The first Republican speaker did too. It's time to do something about it.

A bipartisan committee should be formed to draft new rules defining the powers and duties of the speakership – specifically, the power to appoint committee members should be stripped away. Committee membership should be proportional to the partisan membership. After that, the caucuses should make the assignments. That's the way it is done in the U.S. House of Representatives, and that's the way it is done in the Virginia Senate.

Events of the past several weeks have damaged the image of the Virginia House of Delegates. But members can do a great deal to restore the House to a position of prominence by reforming its rules and its leadership position.

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