

Speakership Reform Needed

Kenneth R. "Ken" Plum

(Appeared in the *Reston Times* on June 19 as "*Reform Needed in Role of Speaker of the House.*")

There was a collective sigh of relief as Delegate Vance Wilkins resigned his position as Speaker of the House of Delegates after admitting that he had paid \$100,000 to settle what could have been a sexual battery charge. In his resignation statement Wilkins said "times have changed and the rules have changed and what was accepted in the era in which I was raised is strictly off limits today."

At the same time, I believe there are problems inherent in the Speaker of the House of Delegates position that also indicate a desperate need for change. That is why I wrote to my colleagues in the House last week proposing that an ad hoc committee be formed to draft new rules for the House of Delegates.

Depending upon which expert you believe, the Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates is the most powerful or the second most powerful person in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Speaker makes all committee assignments, including putting members on committees and taking them off at will, assigns all bills to committee, and controls debate on the floor of the House of Delegates. All bills must pass the House of Delegates before becoming law.

In a previous session of the General Assembly, Speaker Wilkins got his way on a close Rules Committee vote by removing two Democratic members from the Committee just minutes before the vote was to be taken.

In the recently concluded session of the General Assembly, Speaker Wilkins was able to thwart the will of the Governor who supported a sales tax referendum for education and transportation and the Senate that had passed a bill to permit such a referendum by engineering a vote to adjourn the House for the session before a vote could be taken on the bill that would have permitted the referendum.

Clearly, too much power exists in the current position of Speaker. Clearly, there have been examples in recent years where the Speaker has worked his will through intimidation and threats that are inappropriate for a legislative leader.

From the days of Speaker of the House E. Blackburn "Blackie" Moore, who would not assign Republicans to committees that met, to Speaker S. Vance Wilkins, Jr., who took Democrats off committees on which they had the most expertise, it has been obvious that too much power has been vested in a single legislator.

Whether Republicans are able to hold onto power or Democrats are able to regain the majority, this is the time for institutional reform. That reform should put in the rules the requirement of proportional representation of members of political parties on committees. And the reform should strip the Speaker of the House of Delegates of the power to make committee assignments. The political party caucuses should make assignment of members to committees, or a special committee should be established for that purpose as is done in the Senate.

I hope that my proposal for a committee to draft new rules for the House of Delegates will be accepted by the interim Speaker. And I will work for a commitment from all members to select a Speaker who represents a coalition of legislators to rebuild the prestige and honor of the leadership of the House of Delegates.