

Significance of Work

What kind of a legislature was it — good, bad or just average? Did it face its problems squarely, show courage, have vision? How did it get along with the Governor? Who can say? Is there one among the Iowa political experts whose judgment would be accepted over all others as final? Well, hardly. Not when legislators themselves could not agree, and fifteen veteran political writers held widely varying opinions. In any man-on-the-street survey one would be sure to find opinions ranging from “the best” to “the worst” legislature in our history.

This would prove very little, perhaps, except that it was a controversial session — colorful, spirited, confusing. It even had the elements of a stirring “whodunit” — mystery and intrigue. It had humor, too, and politics. For a legislature simply is not a legislature without politics, and politics never lacks for humor. But this time the politics was intraparty rather than interparty, due to the tremendous majority of Republicans, who fought among themselves and, at times, even with the Governor.

The legislature was also educational, for seldom has a legislative session attracted more wide-

spread attention. Perhaps this was because it had greater press-radio coverage than ever before. Perhaps it was because more bills were easier to understand and thus attracted more interest. Perhaps it was a combination of factors.

Whatever the reason, it seems that Iowans learned more about legislative processes, about parliamentary procedures, and about cloakroom maneuvers than ever before. They learned, too, that controversial matters require liberal sprinklings of all three, plus weeks of study before final action, whereas noncontroversial matters can be whisked through the Assembly and signed into law in a matter of hours. Finally, Iowans learned what a vital role the art of compromise plays in formulating our laws.

So it was an educational session, a fact of inestimable value in bringing about improved government. It is axiomatic that the kind of government we get in a democracy depends largely on how well informed the citizens are and to what degree they resolve issues. For the people are still all-powerful in a democracy. Thus, if the 1953 legislature did little more than whet the appetite of the people for more knowledge about their government, it would have reason to feel rewarded. Since this was not all, it is essential to study the record carefully in order to evaluate fairly the legislature's work.

The record shows that this legislature faced not

only the perennial problems that have confronted its predecessors (how to balance the budget and keep taxes at a minimum), but that it faced such new problems as educational television and toll roads. In addition, there was the task of correcting costly mistakes made by past legislatures. One such — the adoption of an unsound public employees' pension program by the 1945 legislature — would have created an estimated \$240,000,000 state debt within twenty-five years had it not been repealed and replaced with new legislation. The municipal code bills adopted in 1951 also had to be revised.

These vitally important matters were largely overlooked by a public that riveted its attention, for the most part, on the progress of the oleomargarine bills. Undoubtedly this was because the oleo bills were before the public eye throughout the entire session, requiring 77 separate actions on 27 days, starting January 13 and ending April 29, before they were passed. Action on bills considered far more important often was taken within four days.

The hard work done on the three bills setting up a new retirement system attests the seriousness with which the General Assembly approached its problems. It was only natural that such highly controversial bills would bring out deep fundamental differences in the philosophies of the members. As a result, legislators divided into two

factions — one intent on cutting back government services and reducing taxes; the other convinced that government must continue to expand soundly in order to keep pace with the rest of the economy.

These differences came out in secret committee sessions and in floor debates over the appropriation bills and the measure increasing the gasoline tax to help finance the highway modernization program. They also provided the inspiration for legislative studies that resulted in reducing or eliminating many unnecessary expenses. For example, centralizing the state printing may result in an estimated saving of \$1,000,000 in a two-year period.

Unfortunately, the oleo debate overshadowed many important actions. For the first time in forty years the House actually debated the question of reapportioning its own seats. In the end, it defeated a proposal to give larger counties more representation by enlarging the House membership. Later it adopted a resolution for a constitutional amendment under which House memberships would represent area while Senate memberships would represent population. This resolution would have reduced House membership from 108 to 99 — one per county — while increasing Senate membership from 50 to 60 on a purely population basis. Action by the Senate would have meant much to over two-thirds of Iowa citizens who pay more than 75 per cent of the cost of state

government but have less than 45 per cent of the legislative seats. The Senate finally did go part way toward meeting the constitutional requirement that it must redistrict its present 50 seats every 10 years, when it reshuffled four districts. These actions required at least a show of courage in comparison with the refusal of past legislatures to face the issue.

It took courage, too, to transfer the office of State Superintendent of Public Instruction from the status of elective to appointive, and to create a new State Board of Public Instruction to supervise the programs for secondary public schools. Confusion entered the picture in this instance for the intent was to remove the office from politics but the legislature put it right back into politics when it required that the Superintendent had to be confirmed by the Senate even though appointed by a Board representing the citizens.

More confusion must have been created in many minds when the legislature increased the standards for embalmers, requiring four years of advanced study before permitting them to handle dead bodies, while clinging tenaciously to laws setting two years of study as enough for teachers instructing young Americans who are very much alive.

Puzzlement also resulted when legislators, professing allegiance to the two-party system, adopted a measure reducing the minority party's mem-

bership from each house on the Budget and Financial Control Committee unless it won at least 10 per cent of the seats in that house. Moreover, the Senate minority party members voted for the bill, while a majority member, Senator Earl C. Fishbaugh, Jr., of Shenandoah, registered the lone vote against it, on the grounds that the bill encroached on the rights of the minority.

Humor and confusion both were present in a matter involving Iowa State College's television station, WOI-TV. Even as some legislators protested that the station must stop accepting commercial advertising, one solon introduced a proposal that (had it passed) would have required WOI-TV to telecast a boxing match currently attracting nationwide attention despite the fact that it was sponsored by a company advertising beer.

Humor is best typified by the comment inspired around the state after the legislature adopted a bill requiring deer hunters to wear on their backs a large red sign marked "Deer." Many quipped that in the spirit of fairness the deer should be made to wear this sign, while that worn by the hunter should read "Man" or "Woman."

Members showed both color and spirit in expressing their uninhibited feelings about the long-range effects of permitting the sale of yellow oleomargarine in Iowa, the proposal to make the Delicious red apple tree the official state tree, the activities of lobbyists, and educational television.

Mystery and intrigue entered the act when the House concerned itself with Secretary of State Melvin D. Synhorst's belated revelation that he was convinced someone had tampered with a House-originated bill adopted in 1951 but vetoed by the Governor. The Secretary declared the bill bore the Governor's signature when it first reached him, but that later it was removed from his files, the signature erased and a veto entered. Speaker Lynes took up the matter at once but withdrew his interest after conferring with the Attorney General, leaving unsolved the mystery of (1) whether the bill actually was tampered with, and (2) if so, who did the tampering.

As this is written a year has not elapsed since adjournment of the legislature. Although it is much too early to assess the long-range historical significance of its work, there was no lack of newspaper editorials reflecting divergent reactions.

Such Independent or Independent-Republican journals as the *Des Moines Register* and the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* took the position that the session fell "short on many pressing problems that have been with us for years," but that "the record indicates a majority of members do not believe progress is at an end." The *Sioux City Journal* felt the Assembly "did a fairly good job . . . in relation to other legislatures."

The opinions of Republican editors were sharply divided. The *Belle Plaine Union* described the

session as "just about average," while the Burlington *Hawk-Eye Gazette* declared the legislature had made "a sorry spectacle of itself." The Charles City *Press* maintained the General Assembly had "its moments of courageous action and also its moments of mediocrity, inertia, even stupidity." The Perry *Chief* defended the Assembly as one "that stood its ground well" while the Hampton *Chronicle* praised it for refusing "to be stampeded by the sob artists." In contrast the independent Decorah *Journal* viewed the session as "a clownish performance." The Creston *News-Advertiser* summed up the view of many papers when it said that the legislature "attracted more than the average amount of criticism . . . but it had some unpopular assignments from the start."

Many others, such as the Jefferson *Herald* and the Iowa City *Press-Citizen*, deplored the "lack of leadership," and the "lack of a strong minority," while the Waterloo *Courier*, likewise Independent-Republican, commented that the body would continue to subject itself "to be ridiculed and criticized" until it reapportioned at least one house on the basis of population.

Democratic papers were no more critical than some Republican editors. The Davenport *Democrat* said too many vital matters were "permitted to go into the last few helter-skelter days of the session," while the Parkersburg *Eclipse* pointed to the record of "deficit spending."

In the final analysis, of course, history will be the judge. But this much can be said: The 55th General Assembly was confronted with a greater number of complex problems than any other in our history. Where it faced up to them, it scored well. In doing that it compiled a defensible record — as far as it went. But there was a strong tendency, despite the changing times, to be too satisfied with things as they were rather than to keep pace with modern progress. Ultimately, history may show that in 1953 the time was ripe to start such a transition period but that the legislature failed to measure up to this wonderful opportunity. Perhaps this was because it lacked able leadership, or perhaps because it lacked a unified majority or a minority numerically strong enough to force the issues.

Whatever the reasons, the opportunity was missed. But a ray of hope exists in that this legislature served as a training ground for more bright young men than have sat as members in many years. Their eyes are on the future, and they are aware of the need to overhaul state government. At the moment they seem destined to play a leading role in bringing it about.

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