

Post

Quiet Revolt Under Way In Senate

By Spencer Rich

Washington Post Staff Writer

A quiet revolution is under way in the Senate, less dramatic but no less significant than the one in the House, and Edward M. Kennedy is a key figure.

The Massachusetts Democrat mustered a liberal coalition that dealt a terrific beating to conservatives when the party's Steering Committee handed out committee assignments recently.

Demonstrating an ability and force long expected but never quite achieved before, Kennedy thoroughly studied the rules, traditions and mathematical formulas governing appointments by the 19-member Steering Committee.

Then he proceeded to grab most of the juiciest new committee slots for liberals and freshmen, and whipped a move by his old rival, Robert C. Byrd (W. Va.), to seat the deeply conservative James B. Allen (Ala.) on the Judiciary Committee, which handles civil rights and criminal-code legislation, and bills on abortion, busing, school prayer and constitutional amendments.

The newly powerful bloc of Democratic liberals regarded the thwarting of Allen's bid for Judiciary as their No. 1 objective as the session opened. Highly effective, a master of Senate rules and the most skillful filibusterer in the Senate, Allen has been labeled a "one-man wrecking crew on civil rights" by Northern Democrats.

Kennedy, working with several other liberals on the 19-man Steering Committee, first engineered a 10-7 vote to give James Abourezk (S.D.) the one vacant Democratic slot on Judiciary.

See SENATE, A23, Col. 2

Outside groups helped freshmen. A14.

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SENATE; From A1

Next day, when Byrd proposed that another Democratic seat be added to Judiciary to put Allen on as well, he lost on a 9-to-9 tie. And when Byrd talked of reconsidering the tie, Kennedy openly threatened to put the matter before the whole caucus of 61 Democratic senators and reverse any pro-Allen vote by the steering unit.

Kennedy, working with Dick Clark (Iowa) and others, also seated two freshman liberals—John Culver (Iowa) and Gary Hart (Colo.)—on the Armed Services Committee, in what he frankly described as a move to "open up" that conservative committee to liberal influences. On a second go-round, another committee seat was added, and it went to a northern freshman, Patrick Leahy (Vt.).

Liberals Clark and Joe Biden Jr. (Del.) got the vacant Democratic posts on Foreign Relations, and tax-reform advocate Floyd Haskell (Colo.) the open post on Finance.

Then, in a move to add still more liberal strength to Finance, which handles tax, tariff and many economic matters, the Kennedy bloc in the second round created a new seat and gave it to William D. Hathaway (Maine).

"Kennedy utterly dominated the sessions. He had learned every nook and cranny of the rules we use for appointments," said a Kennedy nonadmirer.

Kennedy's victory, in a personal sense, marks a milestone in his recovery from the Chappaquiddick incident and the embarrassment of his ouster by Byrd from the whip job in 1971, largely because he hadn't performed the whip function adequately.

But in a much larger sense, it is simply a part of the silent, almost unnoticed realignment of power relationships now going on in the Senate. This quiet revolution is headed in the same direction as the one in the House, and may ultimately carry just as far.

For years the South and its inner Senate "club"—headed by the redoubtable Richard B. Russell (D-Ga.)—ruled the Senate, but now the old-line conservative Dixie legion has shrunk and many of the new Southern senators are liberals or moderates. Democratic liberals, though not in control of the Senate as a whole, are by far the biggest single group within it. Recent elections have made Northerners overwhelmingly the dominant force within the caucus of all 61 Democrats, constituting nearly two-thirds, and on many issues they are joined by younger Southern moderates.

With the aid of Republican liberals

like Clifford P. Case (N.J.), Charles McC. Mathias Jr. (Md.), Jacob K. Javits (N.Y.) and Richard S. Schweiker (Pa.), to name only a few, the big Northern Democratic bloc has a majority on many issues, and it is moving to brush away the institutional barriers that could unduly thwart the will of that majority.

One of the first moves was to assure that committees like Finance and Armed Services were "opened up" to liberals, and Kennedy, Clark and their Steering Committee coalition made a major step in that direction. Without such a move, tax reform could be strangled in Finance, as has happened in the past. Now, at least, the reformers have a strong bloc in Finance, even if not a majority.

Similarly, though they still lack a majority on Armed Services, they have a much larger bloc than ever before, giving them a foothold to fight bigger arms budgets.

Another effort in the same direction was solid backing within the Democratic Caucus—the GOP Caucus also gave endorsement—to force all committee hearings and bill-writing sessions to be open, unless the committee votes to close them for national security or other compelling reasons.

Spurred by a new spirit of reform engendered by Watergate, both caucuses were ready to proceed in this direction. Open sessions give the public assurances that secret and bad deals aren't being cut behind closed doors; moreover, committee members now will have to study the issues beforehand so they won't look like fools during the open deliberations. Open sessions may not immediately produce much better legislation, but they create a cleaner atmosphere.

The overwhelming 45-to-7 Democratic Caucus vote for creating a select committee to investigate spying allegations against the CIA and FBI is another sign of the changing times. Although no one would say so openly, the vote simply meant that the caucus didn't want to rely on conservative old-line committees like Armed Services and Appropriations to ferret out alleged abuses that they have been blind to for years.

Such a rebuff to the formidable Armed Services chairman, John Stennis (D-Miss.), would have been unthinkable even a year or two ago.

Another indication of the revolution was Democratic Caucus adoption of Clark's proposal for closed-ballot election of all committee chairmen by the caucus in the future.

Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.) has always said that he would be glad to comply if any senator wished to stand up in the caucus and demand a secret ballot on the election of a chairman nominated by the Steering Committee. But from Clark's point of view, that procedure would mark the challenger for retribution if the challenged chairman survives. The dissident's own subcommittee staff could be slashed, his legislative proposals quashed. Fear of such retribution naturally has inhibited any challenges.

What Clark finally obtained was an agreement that if one-fifth of the Democrats notify Mansfield anonymously—on forms specially provided to them and returned without signature—that they want a secret ballot on any chairman, it will be held.

That way, nobody need stand up and open himself to the possibility of revenge and punishment.

The Clark method was approved, but it wasn't used this year. The caucus and the Senate routinely approved all the Steering Committee's chairmen nominations by voice vote.

However, Clark had said repeatedly that all he wanted was to install the new machinery for possible later use: Two or four years from now, if present trends continue, there seems a strong possibility that challenges may be mounted to Southern conservatives like Stennis Judiciary Chairman James Eastland (Miss.), Appropriations Chairman John L. McClellan (Ark.) and Finance Committee Chairman Russell B. Long (La.). These could produce the same kind of bloodletting on chairmen that the House has undergone this year.

The new Senate trend needn't be exaggerated: it has just started, it hasn't bitten as deep as in the House.

Because there never has been a germaneness rule for floor amendments or the possibility of barring all floor amendments by a closed rule, there is less pent-up resentment and sense of being stifled in the Senate than in the House. But the process of change has begun.

As for Kennedy, it is clear to most observers that, at age 42, he is rising in the estimation of many senators. His reputation suffered a nosedive after Chapaquiddick in 1969 and his flabby performance as Democratic whip from 1969 to 1971, when he was rarely on the floor and simply didn't do the many difficult, grubby tasks needed for effective leadership.