

Fun while it lasted

After nearly three decades as a member of the House, Kalis says it's time to step down

BY THERESA STAHL

When Rep. Henry Kalis (DFL-Wells) first considered running for office, the editor of his local newspaper asked when he planned to file for candidacy.

He said he'd get around to it the next time he was in the metro area. She had a different idea.

"She said, 'It seems to me if you're going to run for office you ought to let people know you want the job,'" Kalis recalled.

At 2 a.m. the day the Secretary of State's Office opened for filing, Kalis, his wife, and their three young children headed for St. Paul.

"I think the record would show that I was here first each time I've filed, which would have been 14 times."

"Every year I made it a practice," he said, "but it got earlier and earlier every year. I believe last year I was here at two in the afternoon," he said, chuckling.

Kalis said he believes the editor's theory has merit.

"I enjoy this job and I think when you like something you should show people you like it," he said.

But he said he didn't have the same feeling as all those years before on the night after the election for his current term.

"Something was telling me maybe you've done this long enough," he said.

So, at age 65, after 28 years in the House, Kalis is retiring.

He said it's the hardest decision he's made, though he recalls a few other tough moments as a young lawmaker.

Early in his career, Kalis said making any decision was difficult until he had confidence that he was doing the right thing.

"It was before I really understood that in a democracy you are sent here to make decisions, and knowing full well that not everyone was going to like everything I did," he said. After that, "it made the job a whole lot easier."

Serving on the House budget appropriations committee was a turning point for Kalis in starting to feel comfortable, he said.

"I understood everything is driven by the budget and that successful legislators always look to the future. Even though sometimes it's

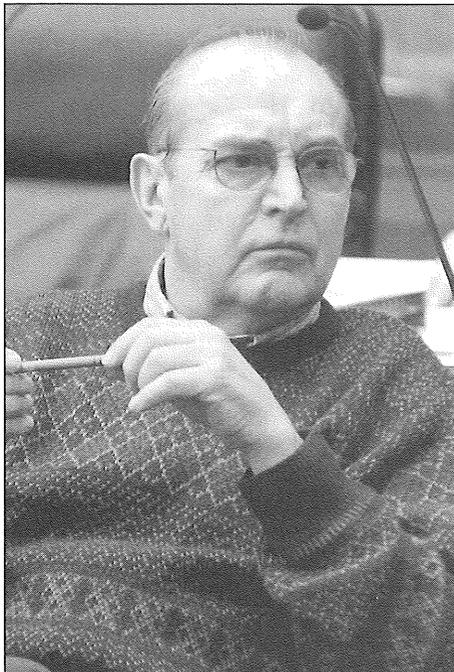


PHOTO BY ANDREW VON BANK

Rep. Henry Kalis, who is retiring after 14 terms in the House, was the first legislator to file his candidacy papers before each election.

hard to understand what we do, our constituents really expect us to look long term."

Kalis said legislators need to have a philosophy, his being the belief that government can do some good for people.

Rep. Dave Bishop (R-Rochester) said Kalis' philosophy on government may have been in conflict when Kalis served as chair of the House Capital Investment Committee.

"One of the odd things about Henry's service on capital investment is he really doesn't like debt," Bishop said. "He's against public debt, but that's what the bonding bill is all about. He wanted to know why (a project) should be done with public, borrowed money."

Bishop said Kalis is "a very thoroughly prepared conservative Democrat," and a "man of integrity."

"Most times he has not had anything in the bill for himself," Bishop said. "He has not tried to play political games, and he has been very knowledgeable."

And House members seem to know that, says Rep. Alice Hausman (DFL-St. Paul), because when Kalis stands to speak on the House floor, members listen.

"You can see that conversation stops, activity stops, and people listen to him," she said. "He speaks from his heart and his comments reflect integrity and common sense."

He sometimes makes such a compelling argument that he's changed some members' votes, including hers, Hausman said.

She and Kalis have long worked together on transportation committees and are friends.

"He is proof that a metro and rural legislator can bridge those regional gaps," Hausman said.

Kalis said he was able to be a representative for 28 years because of "a spouse that really carried a big load for me." His wife, Violet, managed the farm and took care of their four children during session.

While he couldn't make it to a lot of his kids' activities, his children had different advantages from their father's public position.

"All my kids have an ability to communicate," which Kalis said he believes comes from his involvement in the Legislature. "It comes from being pushed out into the limelight with us campaigning."

Kalis realizes his experience as a legislator is rare, and that his 133 cohorts all have something in common.

"We've campaigned, we've all worked through tough elections, we've all pounded on doors, which is unique in society," he said. "We're a very small percentage."

It's quite an honor, he said, to be the only person in his 34,000-person district serving in the House.

"I don't know if anyone else can say that after serving 28 years," he said. "I can say I really enjoyed this." 

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Henry Kalis
DFL
District 26B — Wells
Terms: 14

Career Notes: Kalis has served as chair of the Capital Investment and Transportation Policy and Finance Committees during his House service. He sponsored the 1988 gas tax law (the last time it was raised) and he worked to pass the Groundwater Protection Act and build veterans homes.