

Minority Leader Terry Dempsey . . .

IR leader uses 'reason' to keep caucus in line



Suggest to Minority Leader Terry Dempsey that he is perceived as Gov. Arne Carlson's greatest ally at the Capitol, and he'll let out one of his trademark hearty laughs.

"Is that right? I'm Gov. Carlson's ally?" he asked. "I suppose that's better than being described as his enemy because then I wouldn't have any friends."

That the Independent-Republican from New Ulm would resort to some good-natured humor comes as no surprise; his colleagues at the Capitol say he's one of the most affable guys they've ever met.

But the first three weeks of the 1992 Session were anything but fun and games. There were attempts in the House to override three gubernatorial vetoes, and each time Independent-Republicans calmly maintained the governor's position and rejected the attempts.

Through it all, Dempsey emerged as the keeper of the Independent-Republican flame — the leader who marshaled the forces when the going got tough.

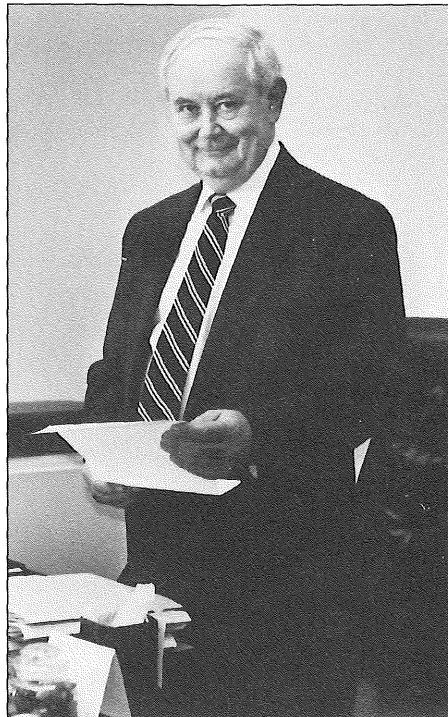
But Dempsey, true to his pledge of a year ago when he was first elected minority leader, said no heavy-handed arm-twisting was employed to keep his caucus in check.

"It was absolutely made clear to the caucus that there was no feeling that anyone had to vote for the governor, or support the governor, or vote with the governor because he's governor," said Dempsey. "I bet if I've said it once, I've said it 20 times, 'You're all free agents . . . on this one, but we're not going to let it become a habit.'"

And Independent-Republican caucus members say that's an accurate reflection of the sometimes stormy caucus meetings.

"I've never had anyone tell me how I can vote," said Rep. Bob Waltman (IR-Elgin), adding that he has nothing but respect for Dempsey and singled out his easy-going style for praise. "That's what makes a good leader — you don't have to stomp your feet."

Dempsey, who is 60 and is serving his 13th year in the House, has led by reason and is by no means a mere messenger for the governor's wishes, say several caucus members.



House Minority Leader Terry Dempsey

So how has he kept the caucus in line, enabling it to withstand the considerable lobbying pressure that is brought to bear in such cases?

"I talked in terms of maintaining a good working relationship with the governor and that it's the right thing to do because we're short of money," he said. "If that makes me the governor's strongest ally, I think it doesn't stop there. I think I'm the ally of my caucus and the ally of the state Independent-Republican Party."

This year, following one of the most contentious sessions in recent memory, Dempsey said partisan bickering appears to be on the wane. Not only has the governor "set the tone" for reaching a bipartisan agreement on the budget deficit, but negotiators are also coming together on a health care access bill.

"If we can cooperate on something that's that major of an issue, it would seem that we have the potential for many of them," said Dempsey. "If we can hit a few major highlights and prove that everything isn't political bickering and haranguing . . . we would really, I think, go a long way toward enhancing our standing in the eyes of the people. They

think we're either dumb or our egos are too big. They want us to cooperate, they really do."

Several caucus members say Dempsey has encouraged cooperation within the IR caucus by delegating responsibility to assistant minority leaders, and through his ability to "get everyone calmed down."

"We come out of there [caucus meetings] feeling relatively good about the communal decision we have made," said Rep. Gil Gutknecht (IR-Rochester), Dempsey's one-time opponent for the minority leader post. "He laughs off a lot of things, but he's always paying attention."

His only fault, say Gutknecht and others, is that he may be too nice — a charge that has frequently been leveled at minority leaders in both the House and Senate.

Perhaps the biggest topic of interest about Dempsey, who is a lawyer, is how long he will remain at the Capitol. His desire to become a judge is no secret.

"I'm the most experienced applicant — not because of my background and training but for the frequency with which I apply," joked Dempsey. But this is the first time he has applied with an Independent-Republican in the governor's office.

Dempsey said he would prefer either one of the district court positions that are open in St. James and North Mankato because he could be close to home, but a position will open in June on the Minnesota Court of Appeals.

Although Dempsey downplays his loyalty to the governor, Gutknecht suggested that few people can be trusted as much as Dempsey.

"If I were in a foxhole, I would want Terry Dempsey next to me," said Gutknecht. "He is fiercely loyal to his friends."

—Grant Moos