

Jim Heap's advice:

Ask questions, grow from the experience

It was an Independent-Republican dinner that changed Rep. Jim Heap from a political greenhorn who taught marketing at Hennepin Technical Center to the 12-year representative from Plymouth he is today.

"I voted, but that was about the extent of my political involvement," says Heap. "I was as green as you would want to get."

He unsuccessfully ran for election in 1976, but tried again in 1978, won, and has been back ever since.

During his tenure at the Capitol, the Independent-Republicans have held control for only two years. Nonetheless, Heap says he believes the minority serves an important function as a watchdog to challenge the majority.

"No party owns the truth," he says. "The majority party, no matter which party has the majority, doesn't have an embodiment of truth. There has to be someone to watch out for monopolized power. This is the role of the minority."

He says his service in the Legislature gave him a crash course in critical thinking, given the range of topics that are routinely discussed at the Capitol.

Nearly 2,000 bills are introduced each year in the House, Heap says, and that while serving on three committees a legislator typically hears testimony on 200 to 300 bills per year.

"You have to learn how to be efficient in dissecting a bill: to ask the tough questions, to ask whether this bill will help or hurt. That's one way you can measure success."

The experience of digesting that information has made him a more vigorous person, Heap says, and the Capitol is an invigorating place. But he's decided to return to work in the private sector and put his management expertise back to work as a business management consultant.

"It's time to move on to other challenges," Heap says. "The sense of accomplishment in the Legislature differs from that in the business world. It's difficult to set those specific goals and objectives that are the stock and trade of



Rep. Jim Heap plans on returning to the business of business after serving 12 years in the House.

the businessman and see specific results in the political arena."

Heap should know. He was a Pillsbury Co. executive for 13 years, and founded four businesses and the non-profit Vail Place, a home for the mentally retarded in Hopkins. In addition, he wrote a financial planning book and helped establish the retail merchandising program at Hennepin Technical Center.

In a sense, however, Heap never strayed far from the business world during his tenure at the Legislature. He sits on the both the Commerce and Economic Development committees, as well as the Appropriations Committee.

He sees a clear link between his role as a businessman and teacher, and political interests in business and economic development: better educational opportunities can lead to a better business environment which creates a higher standard of living.

In fact, two major pieces of legislation

he sponsored that he considers most noteworthy pertain to education and business.

One measure — initially designed to look into whether Minnesota needed all the colleges and universities it has — led to mission statements from the four higher education systems.

The other piece of legislation Heap sponsored in the mid-1980s was a workers' compensation reform measure. It drew bipartisan support in both the House and Senate, but was vetoed by the governor.

"It had DFL and IR support. I worked months behind the scenes to get what I thought was a good bill," Heap says.

What advice does he have for his successor?

Focus on a few areas to become effective, and take in as much of the legislative experience as possible.

"People should look at a representative's job as an opportunity to grow," Heap says. "I can't think of a better way to get an education. It gives you an insight on whatever else you want to pursue — I don't care what it is."

While he says he'll miss being around the Capitol come next January, he won't miss running for re-election.

"It's [campaigning] a strenuous activity," says Heap, adding that it can also be a humbling one.

Heap becomes pensive when stating his hoped-for legislative epitaph.

"I'd like to be remembered by my colleagues as a person who was pleasant to work with, someone who was respected and well thought of as a legislator."

April 2, 1849

On this day, Alexander Ramsey of Pennsylvania was commissioned the first governor of the Minnesota Territory.