

# Pugh hopes to fare well in his new role guiding DFL

by Sandy Donovan

Ask a lawmaker from either side of the aisle to describe new House Minority Leader Tom Pugh (DFL-South St. Paul), and chances are the word "fair" will be mentioned.

"I do think he'll be fair to deal with," said House Speaker Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon).

And colleagues agree. "He strikes me as a fair person, trying to preserve a congenial attitude," said Rep. Elaine Harder (R-Jackson), an assistant majority leader.

Pugh's caucus elected him to the top DFL post in the House last November, after the elections reduced the 70-seat DFL majority to a 63-seat minority.

"My style has always been one of consensus builder rather than bomb thrower," Pugh said. "The choice is to deadlock on partisan issues or to bridge differences and to find solutions. That's been my style and I was elected because of that. If the party felt we needed a table under, I wouldn't have been the choice."

As a lawmaker since 1989, Pugh has worked on issues from tobacco restrictions to property tax relief. Now, he said, he's ready to focus on finding ways to keep DFL-friendly legislation afloat in a Republican-controlled House.

To that end, he'll be working closely with the DFL-controlled Senate and new Reform Party Gov. Jesse Ventura.

"There are certainly opportunities for what we see as basic DFL positions," Pugh said. "Ventura has talked about issues that are similar to DFL positions — lower class sizes, opposing school vouchers. We have a new political experiment in Minnesota with three-party government, so really the chances for one party controlling even one branch of government is gone."



House Minority Leader Tom Pugh aims to be a consensus builder — not a bomb thrower — as he guides the DFL Caucus.

He said he'll lead his caucus with the same style he's maintained throughout his career.

"Your leadership style has to be similar to your style in real life," Pugh said. "My style has always been to get a lot of information, to have people involved, and to reach common ground. That's especially important in our current climate, with people extremely upset and tired of partisan politics. I think the November elections spoke a bit to that."

Pugh called himself a moderate DFLer who's less partisan than some and said that those

qualities will lead to enhanced cooperation between all three parties this session.

"Also, I come from a suburban district, which is an area Democrats have been struggling with," he said. "The need for a suburban voice was one of the topics within the caucus. The alliance between rural and big-city districts has squeezed the suburbs on tax and education issues."

The new minority leader said he's particularly optimistic about working with new Majority Leader Tim Pawlenty (R-Eagan). The two grew up just seven houses away from each other in South St. Paul and continue to play hockey together.

"I'm definitely encouraged by Tim's election. He's also more of a consensus builder than a bomb thrower," he said. "We looked at [his election] as a sign that there's not going to be open warfare."

Substitute "Tom" for "Tim" and those words could be a comment from any number of Republican members about Pugh himself. In addition to noting the minority leader's sense of fairness on the floor, members say he has often reached out with a friendly hand.

"My first encounter with Rep. Pugh was two years ago as a freshman when he and [Rep.] Alice Seagren (R-Bloomington) led the new members' retreat," recalled Assistant Majority Leader Tony Kielkucki (R-Lester Prairie). "I found him very cordial and easy to work with, and he made everybody feel very welcome to the Minnesota House of Representatives."

"I look forward to working with him," Kielkucki said. And he added a final, familiar opinion: "I think he'll be fair to work with."



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