

# Sabo gave his all to strengthen democracy

Much has been said since former U.S. Rep. Martin Olav Sabo died Sunday about his contributions to his Minneapolis-dominated Fifth District during 14 terms in Congress, from 1978 through 2006. Those accolades are richly deserved. The federal funding Sabo secured helped to build light-rail transit and the Midtown Greenway, as well as rebuild the Hennepin Avenue Bridge and Hiawatha Avenue, install major parking garages at the terminus of Interstate Hwy. 394, and much more.

But the native North Dakotan's greatest contribution to his adopted home state may have come when he was DFL leader of the state House.

Sabo might be called the father the modern Minnesota Legislature. He became House speaker in 1973 at age 35, when he was already a six-term House veteran. As minority leader in 1971, he helped enact school and local government funding formulas that together are known as the Minnesota Miracle and endure to this day.

As the House's top official for five years, Sabo ushered in a series of sweeping changes that gave the Legislature its contemporary contour. On his watch, the Legislature met in annual sessions for the first time since the 19th century — a change approved by Minnesota voters in 1972. Legislators again took party labels, which they had dropped 60 years earlier. Open-meeting requirements were adopted and committee rules altered to invite more citizen input and accountability. Legislators were granted private offices and staff to facilitate meetings with constituents — a 1975 change that led to a cascade of state office shifts culminating in the construction of the Minnesota Senate Building, which opened this year.

Sabo enhanced the professionalism of staff work and beefed up House Research, making that office a respected nonpartisan internal think tank. He encouraged Minnesota to become a model for legislative operations, and was recognized with the presidencies of the National Conference of State Legislatures and the National Legislative Conference.

He was held in high esteem at home, too. Sabo's demeanor of modest, unassuming dignity set a tone for the institution. The respect his fellow DFLers had for him papered over dissension within his caucus that erupted into full view after his departure. Republicans found fault with his liberal views but not with his fairness. Long after he left the Legislature for Congress and a parade of successors occupied the speaker's chair, legislators who served with him were heard to remark that for them, there would always be but one "Mr. Speaker" — Marty Sabo.

Sabo was a "career politician," honorably serving the public in elective office for 46 years. No Minnesotan has held elective office for as many consecutive years. The tributes that have poured forth since his death at age 78 stand in contrast to the disdain for "career politicians" that's in vogue in some political quarters today. Sabo was so deeply committed to representative democracy that he made doing it well his life's work. That commitment deserves appreciation, not denigration. This state and nation are better for it.



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Martin Olav Sabo died at age 78.