

short takes

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A MASTER OF BIPARTISANSHIP Searle cut a deal to benefit the state

When voters in the 1978 election sent a state House evenly divided, 67-67, to St. Paul, Minnesota could have lost a crucial legislative year to partisan division, dissension and disorder.

It didn't, and for that, much credit is owed to state Rep. Rod Searle of Waseca, who died Sunday at age 93. He led his caucus in negotiating a power-sharing arrangement with the DFL, then kept the wheels on state government as a fair-minded speaker for one tumultuous year, 1979.

A year later, the DFL was back in power, 68-66, and able to elect a speaker of its own. It might be seen as a compliment to Searle that instead of their own 1979 caucus leader, the brash Irv Anderson, a rump caucus of DFLers allied themselves with like-minded Republicans to elect a DFL speaker with a gentlemanly temperament more like Searle's, Fred Norton. Norton's election may have been the most stunning display of bipartisan cooperation in the state House in the last 40 years.

Searle served 24 years in the Legislature and played a strong hand on K-12 funding, higher education and natural-resources policy. He went on to serve

on several higher-education governing boards and played an active role at Minnesota State University, Mankato, his alma mater.

But his career's pinnacle, and his greatest contribution to Minnesota, came after the 1978 election produced an unprecedented and seemingly unworkable result. Who was in charge of the House in the case of a tie? Searle and Anderson cut a deal that neither side liked, but that both could live with. The Republicans got the speakership and were chairs of subdivisions of the powerful money committees, on which they had a one-vote majority. DFLers chaired the full money committees, on which they had a one-vote majority, and the rules committee.

The deal might have collapsed but for the respect legislators on both sides of the aisle had for Searle. A native of New Jersey educated at Rutgers before coming to Minnesota, Searle was, as Gov. Mark Dayton described him Sunday, "a principled leader, a dedicated public servant and a true gentleman." He was the man Minnesota needed in 1979. If the voters ever send 67 Republicans and 67 DFLers to the House again — and they could — I hope Minnesota has leaders on hand just like him.

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