

A skilled compromiser . . .

Welle leads DFL caucus with 'soft touch'



It comes as no surprise that Majority Leader Alan Welle would rank the 1987 tax bill and the 1991 health care access proposal as two of the legislative accomplishments of which he is most proud.

Both bills required careful crafting and skillful compromise to balance the diverse interests that are always at odds in the Legislature.

That the newly elected majority leader would delight in fashioning both bills, as well as orchestrating a compromise, is vintage Welle, say his supporters.

"First and foremost, his primary objective is to solve a problem," said Rep. Roger Cooper (DFL-Bird Island), one of Welle's closest friends at the Capitol. "He's very good — wonderful — at getting a grip on what the problem is and working toward a solution."

Added Sen. Dean Johnson (IR-Willmar), whose Senate district includes Welle's House district, "He's a student of politics and he likes to crunch numbers."

Some were surprised that the mild-mannered, low-profile Welle, chair of the Health and Human Services Committee in 1990 and 1991, emerged the victor following a 2-1/2-hour, seven-ballot battle for the majority leader post. The job has traditionally been held by those known for their aggressive spirits.

"We're all a little agog that he is majority leader," said Welle's boss, Bill Gulbrandsen, director of the Area Learning Center in Willmar, a program for handicapped and disadvantaged students. "He doesn't come across as a power person at all. He's a little laid back and seems to be a little more unassuming than the prototypical politician who fights his way all the way to the top."

But people at the Capitol weren't surprised and neither was Welle.

"Even though I haven't had a big public profile since I've been here, I've had a pretty active behind-the-scenes profile on controversial issues," said Welle. "I thought I was going to get down to the final two (candidates) all along."

Welle, 45, was born in Melrose, Minn. — about 40 miles north of Willmar. He



House Majority Leader Alan Welle

graduated from Melrose High School, got a degree in business administration from St. Cloud State University, and served in the U.S. Army in Vietnam.

After returning, he received certification from the University of Minnesota to teach business education, and in 1975 moved to Willmar, where he taught business at the local technical college. For the past three years he has worked as a work experience coordinator at the Willmar school district's Area Learning Center.

There, he helps at-risk and handicapped students develop job and living skills so they can enter the work force. "He fits in really good with the kids," said Gulbrandsen. "They love him. He's caring and compassionate and patient."

Welle said it was really an accident that he ended up at the Capitol at all. In 1980, he was serving as the Kandiyohi County DFL treasurer when the party was looking for someone to run against Independent-Republican Dean Johnson, who then served in the House.

"We couldn't find anybody so I filed myself at the last minute," said Welle. He lost by a wide margin that year. But when Johnson moved to the Senate in 1982, Welle ran again and has been elected by wide margins ever since in the political "swing" district.

In 1983, he and several other rural freshmen DFLers shook up the party by forming a group that later became known as the "wood ticks" — named for the

more conservative business views of outstate DFLers. The group joined Independent-Republicans in pushing for workers' compensation reform, an issue he has wrestled with ever since.

Welle's more conservative business stance led some to label him anti-labor during the July election for majority leader. But he said the claim is untrue, and the most recent legislative ranking from the AFL-CIO seems to back him up. The labor group gave him a 100 percent score in 1990.

Welle said his experience as the owner of a company dealing in lumber, construction, and development — which closed in 1985 during the '80s farm crisis — gave him a first-hand look at the difficulties facing small businesses on main street America.

While he is well-known at the Capitol for forming a coalition of DFLers from Greater Minnesota, Welle said he has a better understanding of the inner cities and suburbs than many people think. During his first four terms at the Legislature, his wife and two children came to St. Paul with him for each long session. And they lived everywhere from downtown high-rises to suburban homes.

"I think my kids have turned out to be very well-adjusted and self-confident because they've been exposed to a lot of different environments," he said. "And I think it's given me a broader understanding."

As for the task of keeping the various factions within the DFL happy, Welle pledged to use a sense of humor and his skills as a compromiser to lead the caucus. And Johnson said he expects partisan bickering to diminish with Welle at the helm, adding that "very seldom" do the two of them engage in party warfare at public functions in Kandiyohi County.

He described their relationship as "cordial, friendly. Having said that, I know way back in the hollows of his mind he's thinking politically. . . . He's not majority leader because he attended Sunday school four days in a row."

Added Welle, "I can be political if I have to."

— Grant Moos