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Legislature's opening day 20 years ago pretty hard to top for political chaos

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There is always a certain amount of chaos at the opening of a legislative session as newcomers scramble to find their places, members are sworn in and all of the pro forma organizational resolutions are adopted.

But nothing that transpires this Tuesday, when the 1991 Minnesota Legislature convenes, will match the scene in the Senate chamber 20 years ago this week.

On opening day in 1971, the lieutenant governor blocked the seating of one senator and cast an unprecedented tie-breaking vote. The chief justice of the Supreme Court stalked out, refusing to swear in anyone. And for the next eight days, both parties claimed to be in control of the Senate.

That was chaos.

In the 1970 election, the DFL-aligned "Liberals" — as their caucus then was known — had made major and unexpected gains, unseating such veteran Conservatives as Gordon Rosenmeier of Little Falls, Donald O. Wright of Minneapolis and Henry Harren of Albany.

These senators — along with a few colleagues — had run the Senate with an iron hand, for years. Junior members of the Conservative majority hardly had a voice in the work of the Senate, much less members of the Liberal minority.

"It wasn't that they were abused," one longtime Capitol observer recalled. "They were ignored."

The Liberals, led by the late Nicholas Coleman of St. Paul, saw their chance to grab for power after the 1970 election results were fully tabulated — and several close contests were decided.

The Senate was split exactly 33 to 33, with the 67th seat held by Richard Palmer, a Senate newcomer from Duluth who



Palmer



Holmquist



Coleman

had run as an independent and had promised to caucus with the majority. Suddenly, Palmer was the majority.

For several weeks, both caucuses wooed Palmer with promises of plum committee assignments. But it quickly became clear that Palmer was a Republican and intended to caucus with the Conservatives, giving them the 34th vote they needed to maintain control.

But Palmer also was under something of a cloud. Duluth DFLer Francis (Frenchy) LaBrosse, the senator Palmer defeated, had lodged an unfair campaign practices complaint that the full Senate ultimately would have to decide.

Coleman made no secret of his intention to commit some sort of opening-day mischief. But Sen. Stanley Holmquist, the courtly Conservative leader from Grove City, remained confident. He was armed with an attorney general's opinion saying that Palmer could be seated and could vote on organizational matters — despite the campaign charge lodged against him.

However, Holmquist was caught off guard on opening day when DFLer Rudy Perpich, the newly elected lieutenant governor, refused to accept Palmer's election certificate, throwing the Senate into a 33-33 tie. Perpich then ruled that he — as presiding officer — could break the tie, permitting the Liberals to take control of

the Senate for the first time in state history.

Oscar Knutson, the gruff, no-nonsense chief justice of the Supreme Court, was so taken aback that he walked out and refused to administer the oath of office to any of the assembled senators.

With Perpich's support, the Liberals then authorized a DFL House member who happened to be standing in the back of the chamber to swear in the Senate, minus Palmer.

At Holmquist's urging, Palmer stood anyway and took the oath with the rest of the Senate — then took it a second time with a Republican attorney performing the honors. But Perpich refused to recognize Palmer's existence, and continued breaking ties in favor of the Liberals.

At one point, Holmquist mockingly referred to Perpich as "your highness," an uncharacteristically sharp remark for which he later apologized. But before the afternoon was over, Holmquist led a walkout of his caucus.

For more than a week, the Senate remained in chaos. The two sides fought it out on the floor several more times, and each produced a daily Senate Journal with its printed version of the parliamentary wrangling.

It appeared that Coleman was playing for a tie, an even split of the Senate committee chairmanships and assignments for his caucus. But the Conservatives refused to bargain. They took their case to the Supreme Court, which ruled 6-1 that the lieutenant governor had exceeded his authority.

In the short term, the Liberals paid a price for their bid for power. The Conservatives stripped Coleman and his colleagues of some valued committee assignments.

But the chaotic opening of the 1971 session also may have helped to dramatize how long the Conservatives had controlled the Senate — how long some consumer, labor and environmental initiatives championed by the Liberals had been pigeonholed in committee. In the 1972 election, after a court-ordered reapportionment, the DFL captured control of the Senate by a 37-30 margin, and it has retained control ever since.

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