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Duncan's legacy

Longtime lawmaker Jim Duncan's 24 years as a legislator changed the face of Alaska. Now, he's angling for bigger game with a run against Don Young for Alaska's congressional seat.



Duncan today: Sen. Jim Duncan keeps up with business during last week's Senate recess
BRIAN WALLACE / THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

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By MARK SABBATINI
THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

His political career began when a policeman threw him out of the Baranof Hotel for looking like a hippie. He remains Alaska's only House Speaker to be forcibly ousted from office. In recent years, as the state Legislature's senior member, he has been the preeminent Democratic voice in a Republican regime.

Sometime this spring or summer, Jim Duncan will leave the Senate floor for the last time, ending a 24-year legislative career that has seen notable, occasionally historic, peaks and valleys. His list of political accomplishments is longer than most people say they can remember, working in a Capitol some claim might be long gone from Juneau without his influence.

Local landmarks from Centennial Hall to the University of Alaska Southeast library are credited to him. More than 70 laws sponsored by him that affect public employees, seniors, the disabled and a variety other groups are in the statute books. Several legislators rate him among a handful of top lawmakers in understanding rules and procedures of the job.

“He is probably the best person that does his homework and research and is then able to express it,” said Sen. Al Adams, a Kotzebue Democrat. “Not only professionally, but in terms the layman can understand.”

Possessing a quick wit and a quick temper, Duncan, 56, has charmed friends by remembering small favors such as honorary citations in the midst of chaos and irritated foes by droning endlessly during floor debate about proposals he disapproves of. Observers said he is most at home on the Senate floor and working the halls, less comfortable with crowds and the public speaking roles that come with his current status as Senate Minority Leader.

"I don't think Jim is really an outgoing person," said Jim Wakefield, a real estate agent and former labor leader who met Duncan during his first House run in 1974. "I don't think he's the type of guy that's comfortable in big group situations no matter how well he handles it. I've always felt that touch of uneasiness when he's in a big group."

Duncan, who is running for Congress this year against 25-year incumbent Republican Don Young, said being around people is not one of his weaknesses.

"What I've enjoyed most about it is the ability to interact with people and to debate," he said. "I love a good debate and I'm good at it. I think being able to do that and work with the issues that help people have probably been the greatest satisfaction."

Born in Muscatine, Iowa, Duncan moved to Alaska in 1962 and worked as an accountant, business owner and university instructor. Although he gave up businesses such as a restaurant to focus on politics, he has continued teaching public administration classes at UAS.

Duncan rose rapidly as a newcomer to the House, earning praise for his quick grasp of complex issues. In 1981 he prevailed in a bitter fight to become House Speaker, but 133 days later became the first presiding officer in state history to be removed from office as key supporters betrayed him in a coup.

He emerged more mature in the eyes of colleagues and unscathed in the minds of voters, who elected him to the state Senate five years later. Any chance of reaching the upper tiers of power there died, however, when Republicans took control in 1992. In recent years as the leader of a shrinking minority his public role at the Capitol has largely been to protest policies destined to become law, hoping the media or viewers of public television take notice.

Duncan is given virtually no chance of defeating Young by the Washington, D.C., congressional newspaper Roll Call, which notes Duncan "is best known for blocking efforts to move the

Capitol (out) of Juneau." The characterization is hardly a compliment, given much of the state's resentment toward Juneau's inaccessibility, but Duncan isn't complaining.

``That's a badge of honor if that's what they paint on me," he said.

Sen. Randy Phillips, an Eagle River Republican who will become the Legislature's senior member when Duncan leaves, is a leading capital move supporter who cites the issue first among Duncan's accomplishments.

``He's done his job to keep me from doing mine," Phillips said. ``It's going to be pretty darn hard to replace 24 years of experience . . . which will probably make my job easier, what I want to do."

THE EARLY YEARS

About 30 years ago - probably 1968, although Duncan isn't sure - presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey held a \$50-a-plate fund raiser at the Baranof Hotel in Juneau. Shortly before the candidate arrived, a scruffy-looking political junkie without money for a ticket walked into the lobby.

``I had on a leather jacket and long hair and a beard, you know, kind of like you would wear in those days," Duncan said. ``I was standing reading the paper and the police came up and asked me to come over to the side, put me up against the wall and searched me and asked me to leave."

``That infuriated me and on my way home after I didn't get to see him I said `I think that the local police department needs to be looked at.' "

Duncan ran for the Juneau Assembly and lost, but was appointed to a position in 1972 and elected later that year to serve a full term. Two years later, without the beard and leather jacket, he decided to move up to state politics.

His opponent that November was House Majority Leader Mildred Banfield, a four-term Juneau Republican. He made the ballot by being among the top two Democrats in the August primary, but faced an uphill battle as Banfield trounced him by 19 percentage points in the overall vote.

The primary also saw statewide voters authorize the Legislature to move the Capitol, prompting the Empire to endorse Banfield. The paper stated Juneau's seats could not be a ``training ground for new legislators" during ``the most important legislative

session to Juneau ever held."

Duncan scored a major upset that supporters later credited to a number of factors, including Banfield's association with a Republican majority that incurred the wrath of state employees dissatisfied with their rights. But Duncan also was credited for running the hardest campaign and taking advantage of television for the first time in a local election, including an hour-long campaign-paid debate where Banfield was represented by an empty chair.

"We did that about 10 days out before the election," Duncan said. "The next poll showed I was ahead."

Duncan never again faced a serious challenge in an election as he joined fellow Democrats Mike Miller and Bill Ray in a Juneau delegation that lasted 10 years. The trio joined forces to ensure Duncan's subsequent election to the Senate and by 1994 opponents stopped challenging him.

He got off to a fast start as an incoming House member. His quick grasp for facts and figures as an accountant immediately landed him a seat on the Finance Committee, the equivalent in prestige of chairing other committees in the eyes of some.

"From the very beginning he proved himself to be a superb negotiator with other members," Miller said. "It would just be a few more thousand for a local project here or a local project there."

Duncan said he doesn't remember the first bill he introduced, but the first one passed that session created new fire training facilities across the state, including one near the Alaska State Troopers' office in Juneau.

Mike Bradner, a Fairbanks Democrat who was House Speaker during Duncan's first term, said he was among a handful of newcomers able to meet the tougher challenges. As a result he was also asked to work on a variety of other complex issues, such as tax policy on the state's oil reserves and the creation of an agency that established small electrical power projects throughout Alaska.

"He had to come in with a lot of young guys who had to step up to leadership fast and there were questions about how they would do," Bradner said.

Duncan's ideas for fighting the capital move included seeking thorough cost studies, arguing the price tag was closer to \$3 billion than the \$500 million estimated by others. He also

demanded voters approve the costs in a bond vote all at once instead of in smaller chunks that might seem more palatable.

By 1980 Duncan was chairman of the House Budget and Audit Committee and predicting during campaign debates that with support from Fairbanks and the Bush ``we can beat the fight for a capital move for many years to come."

He muscled \$8 million for Centennial Hall that year by stalling other legislation until it was funded. He defeated his closest election opponent by a 3-to-1 margin in the fall and the Empire lauded him as someone who ``stood tall in the sometimes viscous atmosphere of the state Capitol, helping to defend the future of Alaska's Capital City."

THE RISE AND FALL AS HOUSE SPEAKER

On the 22nd day of the 1981 session Duncan reached what might have been his pinnacle of power as he prevailed in a record-length battle for House Speaker. But in what some described as the most bizarre session in state history, he found himself standing with his arms defiantly folded at an empty desk four months later as former supporters stripped the title from him.

The session began ingloriously as Duncan and his chief opponent for speaker, Rep. Sam Cotten of Eagle River, were both unable to get the 21 votes needed to secure the seat. Duncan prevailed by giving the coveted Finance Committee chairmanship to Cotten, despite doubts by some he was up to the task since he had never served on the committee.

Duncan's first choice for the position was Rep. Russ Meekins of Anchorage, a Duncan supporter and Finance Committee veteran who agreed to give up the chairmanship and instead accept the title of Majority Leader. It was a compromise that would not last.

The session dragged on a record 165 days, with Duncan trying to keep his brittle two-vote House majority intact. Everyone wanted a share of the oil revenues that were beginning to pour in. He incurred the wrath of capital move supporters by holding up legislation on the issue. Meanwhile, the large minority caucus was stealing votes on any issue it could.

``He walked into that job with two strikes against him," Miller said.

Some lawmakers began complaining there was no clear direction in leadership. Rural legislators who formed the backbone of

Duncan's support said they felt slighted in the budget. Oil companies began lobbying behind closed doors when a tax break Duncan opposed was stalled by Cotten in the Finance Committee.

On July 9, Duncan said he knew his coalition was in trouble when a group of legislators demanded he replace Cotten.

“My response was I can't do that, I've made by commitment and I won't do that,” Duncan said. “I could have buckled in, broken a commitment to a colleague and probably saved my position as speaker.”

At 2 p.m. June 12, Meekins walked onto the House floor, sat in the speaker's chair and gavelled 20 other dissidents to order without any notice to Duncan's supporters or the public. Moments later they elected Meekins temporary speaker and he began a leadership reorganization.

Meanwhile, stunned Duncan supporters rushed to the floor and began a back-and-forth shouting match that lasted throughout the 40-minute session.

“This is an illegal vote,” accused Miller, who called the proceeding a “kangaroo session.” “You have no right being where you are.”

Duncan's attempt to regain his seat failed on the floor and in court, and the session ended under Republican leadership.

“It took me a while to recover,” Duncan said. “You just don't get up the next day and say everything is great.”

Meekins fared little better. His choice for speaker, Democrat Oral Freeman of Ketchikan, refused the position. The Finance Committee chairmanship - which Duncan speculated was Meekins' goal - went to someone else. By the end of session Meekins had abandoned the new coalition.

While Meekins would be gone from the Legislature a year later, Duncan managed to patch most of the damaged relationships with his colleagues and continue his career.

“I think it matured him,” Ray said. “I think that he got more serious in his job and he realized that something very severe had happened to his career and he went to work to make every effort to overcome that, which he very successfully did.”

GOING TO THE SENATE

Duncan easily won two more terms to the House, but in 1986 it was evident a major shake-up was about to occur in Juneau politics.

Ray and Miller announced their retirement from the Legislature, clearing the way for Duncan to go after a seat he long desired.

“I always wanted to be in the state Senate, but like anything else you wait your time,” he said. “You don't run against a friend.”

His Republican opponent was Lee Stoops, a former legislative staff member and lobbyist who thought Ray might be vulnerable. But when Duncan ran instead, with Miller and Ray providing support, Stoops knew the race was an exercise in futility.

“I'm sure I wasn't taken seriously as his opponent and I'm not sure I should have been,” he said.

Stoops ran on the theme that Duncan had not done a good job of securing enough money for local building projects because he was part of the legislative minority. But in future years Stoops declared it was impossible for any candidate to beat Duncan, because of what Duncan could claim was accomplished.

“Nobody's going to win when you can point to everything in town and say ‘I procured the funding for this,’ ” Stoops said. “Who's going to beat you?”

Duncan defeated Stoops by a 2-1 margin and began a relatively seamless transition to his new position. He secured a seat on the Senate Finance Committee, pushed through a cost-of-living adjustment for teachers, established a senior housing program that built facilities such as Juneau's Fireweed Place and made early retirement available to various public employees.

A major victory came in 1992 when his bill allowing public teachers to strike became law despite a veto by then-Gov. Walter J. Hickel. The vote was heralded as an election-year showdown between Hickel and organized labor, with Duncan securing the bare minimum of 40 votes needed to pass the measure.

“It took 15 years to get that passed,” Duncan said.

THE FINAL YEARS

He thought he might have a shot at becoming Senate President the following year, but another setback was in store. Republicans came out of the election with an 11-9 majority coalition and when the session resumed Duncan was no longer on the Finance Committee.

``Apparently he raised too many waves," Ray said. ``He didn't play the game, I guess you would say, and as such they eased him out."

Duncan said the claim is untrue and he was asked by Senate Democrats to become the new Minority Leader. But as the Republican majority grew over the years, so did Duncan's frustration at what he said was an increasingly partisan process.

``I would rather be in the majority," he said. ``I would rather be setting public policy."

There were victories, including turning back efforts to move the location of Legislative sessions as a watered-down alternative to relocating the Capitol. Duncan also increasingly focused on health care legislation, most of which stalled in committees, although a proposal expanding Medicaid coverage for children and pregnant women was adopted in another measure this year pushed by Gov. Tony Knowles.

One of his final legislative triumphs came last year when the local Johnson Youth Center was seeking a much-needed expansion and Republicans backed out of a commitment to fund it. Duncan blasted them in a floor speech until enough Republicans switched their votes. They later rescinded the action after meeting behind closed doors, but eventually found an alternate way to fund the expansion.

At a farewell party on what should have been his last day in session this month, framed photographs on a table in the corner captured some highlights: he, Miller and Ray in a ``hear-see-and-speak-no-evil" pose during a parade; chairing the session as House Speaker; posing with longtime friend and former Sen. Fred Zharoff as the Blues Brothers (Duncan could never figure out which one he was supposed to be). At the back corner was a picture of Duncan shaking hands with President Clinton at an Anchorage reception, no doubt a scene Duncan hopes will be repeated by an entry into Washington, D.C., politics.

Just after midnight Duncan was given the honor of adjourning the session for the year, a task typically reserved for the newest member. But as minority leader his task wasn't finished, as he went before the cameras to explain where things had gone wrong and why the failure to resolve certain issues meant lawmakers would be back in a special session on subsistence this week.

By midday, as other lawmakers caught up on sleep or fled for vacation destinations, Duncan was on a plane beginning a

congressional campaign swing. Far from being exhausted by his 24 years of toil, he said he can't imagine doing anything but continuing it.

"I love this process," he said. "I think it's frustrating to individuals, but serving in public office is one of the greatest honors a person can have."

If he loses, friends speculated he may seek other political work in D.C., lobby for issues at the state level or position himself for a more competitive congressional run in the future. Duncan admitted he faces an uphill battle for Congress, but insisted he isn't allowing himself to think about any next step beyond politics.

"I'm not going to disappear from the scene," he said. "I'll be involved in one way or another."

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