

May 1, 2011

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Disaster brings unity to fighting Senate

The activity in the Alabama Senate was turbulent on Tuesday and early Wednesday, but the hard feelings seemed to recede as lawmakers became more aware of the disaster that had hit many of the districts that they represent.

The disaster became personal quickly for several of the lawmakers.

Three senators, Clay Scofield of Arab, Paul Busman of Cullman, and Linda Coleman of Birmingham had damage to their property.

Sen. Vivian Davis Figures of Mobile wept as she tried to talk about a loved one in Tuscaloosa who had the roof ripped off of her apartment and said nearby apartments were leveled.

The politics that had consumed them and led to yelling on the Senate floor just hours before seemed to fade.

Democrats and Republicans in the Senate clashed soon after coming in on Tuesday. Republicans felt Democrats were delaying on non-controversial legislation so they decided to run over them and keep them there as long as they wanted to slow down business.

Democrats felt Republicans were abusing their power, ignoring and disrespecting them, while not allowing them to discuss bills or offer amendments.



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Democrats would use the rules to slow down passage of bills, but Republicans would take the necessary steps to brush them aside. But that was taking between 30 minutes and an hour for each bill. So, progress was slow.

And the tension intensified as the Senate, which convened at 3 p.m. Tuesday, worked until 6:30 a.m. Wednesday.

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Annis-ton, said he tried to pacify Democrats and would work with them if they would share their true concerns.

"It is obvious there is another agenda, and I quite obviously don't know what it is," he said.

After all, Marsh had just announced that he was adding mostly Democratic women to committees after they complained they were not adequately represented. Women, who make up less than 15 percent of the membership of the Senate, are now on 95 percent of committees.

There are five women in the 35-member Senate. None of them are Republicans.

When Democrats continued delaying after that, Marsh and other Republicans decided to cut off all but one Democrat-sponsored bill on the agenda.

Republicans voted nine times to cut off the Democrats and move forward with proposals.

Senate Minority Leader Roger Bedford, D-Russellville, said Republicans shutting down debate was an abuse of power.

"They will not allow reason to work or answer legitimate questions about where are millions of dollars in taxpayer dollars going," Bedford said.

"They do not want to have transparency or accountability because that is what you have when you have legitimate debate."

Marsh said he believes exercising the power of the majority would benefit the people of Alabama.

"We are in the majority and in a position if we have to, to run over people," he said.

But, despite Marsh's tough words and Republicans slashing Democratic bills from the agenda, he was still largely accommodating to Democrats, even as they slammed him publicly.

Democrats, in a Wednesday release, claimed

Marsh and Lt. Gov. Kay Ivey were the most partisan pro tem and presiding officer in history.

Black Democrats were angry that they were allowed minimal time to talk about a bill that would remove racist, segregationist language from the state constitution. Democrats voted against the proposed constitutional amendment.

Sen. Quinton Ross, D-Montgomery, yelled as he tried to get Ivey's attention as they adjourned shortly before 7 a.m. Wednesday. And then he had words with Marsh as they left the floor.

The Democrats said Ivey and Marsh showed blatant disrespect for the Democrats dealing with a historic and sensitive issue. Ross questioned why the Republicans would not let them talk about an issue that affected them and their families, but did not directly impact a single member of the majority.

Figures, D-Mobile, objected to Democrats being called obstructionists. She said the Republicans are quickly forgetting the weeks they spent slowing down the Senate when Democrats were in the majority.

She is right. In recent years, Republicans shut down the Senate for days at a time — sometimes because they wanted to delay getting to specific bills, but other times because they were unhappy with the ma-

ajority and its operating rules.

Both sides dug in their heels last week and were determined to prove their respective points — which did not benefit anybody in the end. Democrats can slow down business and lob criticism at Republicans, but the GOP has the majority and they can exercise it to run over the Democrats. And they did.

That mood did change as news about the storms moved through the State House.

The House and Senate set their times to return when they leave each day so they had already set that by the time everyone became aware of the severity of the tornadoes.

So, they convened on Thursday morning, but quickly moved through the necessary business so people could return to their districts.

And while the senators will undoubtedly return to those partisan fights, some members will return on Tuesday with a much different perspective and hopefully different priorities.

Sebastian Kitchen can be reached at 240-014. The Montgomery Advertiser's blog about government and politics in Alabama, South Union Street, can be found by going to madvertiserblogs.com/southunionstreet.

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