

1990 House Leaders *Speaker of the House*

Speaker Vanasek was once a Republican

House Speaker Robert Vanasek (DFL-New Prague) is generally considered to hold the second most powerful position in state government. But few people know he actually started his political career as a Republican.

While a student at the University of Minnesota, Vanasek supported Nelson Rockefeller for the 1968 Republican Party's nomination for president.

But when Richard Nixon got the nomination, he says he became dissatisfied with the Republicans and switched to the Democratic Party. Later that year, he was in Chicago for the 1968 Democratic National Convention and watched the rioting in Grant Park. Those experiences, and being dissatisfied with the current Democratic administration, sparked his interest in trying to change the system.

He later joined his local DFL organization in Scott County and was planning to do campaign work for a local incumbent representative. But due to reapportionment that year, he found himself living in a new district without an incumbent running for re-election. In 1972, people encouraged him to run for the open seat. He won and has been re-elected ever since. When session begins Feb. 12, he will begin his third year as speaker.

Vanasek represents District 25A, a rural district 50 miles south of the Twin Cities covering parts of four counties: Dakota, Le Sueur, Rice, and Scott.

He has served as chair of various committees and assistant majority leader in 1978, a position he was re-elected to in 1980 and 1982. He was elected as the majority leader in 1986 and served in that position until he became speaker in 1987.

Vanasek says he enjoys presiding over House floor sessions and representing House positions in negotiations with the Senate and governor. He says another part of the job he enjoys is looking out for the House as an institution. That role, he says, is one often overlooked by others as an important function of the speaker.

His dislikes of the job stem from having to give the last word on problems unsolvable at lower levels, he says. Other problems arise out of time demands and day-to-day distractions that he says keep him from concentrating on the bigger issues facing the state.

As speaker, he works with both Majority Leader Dee Long (DFL-Mpls) and Minority Leader Bill Schreiber (IR-Brooklyn Park). He said he has a good working relationship with Long, and that they work as a team in leading the DFL caucus.

He believes he has a good working relationship with Schreiber, one that's based on mutual respect. Even though he and Schreiber don't always agree on issues, he says they are able to communicate with each other. And that helps the House function more smoothly.

Vanasek says there's more partisanship in the House today than 15 years ago — and more party feuding than there needs to be. He thinks there has been a lowering of partisanship in the last few years, and he hopes it can be lowered even more. Not all issues are ones that have to

separate Democrats and Republicans, he says, and both parties are working to lower tensions.

Since getting his bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Minnesota in 1971, he attended Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government on a Bush Fellowship. He received his master's degree in public administration in 1988.

He has received numerous service awards while in the House. He was honored by various organizations, including the Minneapolis/St. Paul Archdiocese, named the "Outstanding Young American" by the Jaycees (1979 and 1984), and named "Legislator of the Year" by two different organizations. He participates in local community activities and is a member of the New Prague Volunteer Fire Department.

Asked what he wants to do when he leaves the Legislature, he says he hasn't made any plans. He says that throughout his political career he has waited and evaluated his opportunities as they arose. He'll continue on that course.



House Speaker Robert Vanasek