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After 14 Years, a Republican Is Back on the Senate Rostrum

The Democratic majority California State Senate has made history, of a sort.

When Senate President Pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg, a Sacramento Democrat, agreed to GOP Sen. Jean Fuller's request to be one of the Senate's presiding officers she became the first Republican to be allowed to do so in 14 years.

The last Republican at the rostrum was the late Bob Beverly, forced out of the Legislature by term limits in 1996.



"I'm honored that they accepted my request to help with what I consider my responsibility," Fuller said in an interview. "I'm a member of the Rules Committee and I feel it's very important to engage in the process of conducting the business of the house."

Fuller may also be the first Republican woman senator designated to preside. Former Sen. Rebecca Morgan of Morgan Hills took a number of turns presiding but long-time Senate staffers don't recall her being part of the official "bullpen."

Steinberg's move harkens back to the Senate's tradition of its members differing on issues but elevating the operation of the house above partisanship.

"The bottom line for the pro tem is he's looking forward to reinforcing the idea we're all in this together and we need to work together," said Mark Hedlund, a Steinberg spokesman. "He felt Sen. Fuller would be a good fit."

In the fractious Assembly, Republicans most recently presided only when they had control of the house from mid 1995 through 1996.

During her two-terms in the Assembly prior to coming to the Senate, Fuller, 59, wasn't strident and was genial with her colleagues, Democrat and Republican.

That's helpful but being the presiding officer isn't a simple task.

Foremost, the presiding officer needs to know the rules of the house better than any other member.

And the rules are more intricate than simply Roberts.

Former Assembly Speaker Willie Brown and his oldest political ally John Burton were encyclopedic, using their mastery of the rules to parry off partisan attacks and quietly dispatch unwanted bills with a *sotto voce* re-referral to committee often missed in the din of the lower house.

The right balance has to be struck between efficiently conducting business and brusqueness. There are points of order to be ruled on. Schoolchildren, guests and dignitaries to be introduced. The usually pro forma beginning of each floor session with the flag salute and waiving of the reading of the previous day's journal can be a tongue-twisting minefield.

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And, like the Internet, malapropos live forever. Former Assemblyman Joe Baca would have been wiser not to seek to preside. Some conjectured Brown gave him the job as punishment.

Nearly every occasion Baca took the rostrum there was a misstatement. He once famously thanked the “Black African American Caucus,” for example.

Fuller said her staff has pulled together videotapes of various important dates during the legislative session – the final day, the opening day and so on – to give her a feel for the task ahead.



Another possible strategy might be to find video of those presiding officers who performed the job well – starting with Beverly.

The stentorian Beverly, a member of the Rules Committee like Fuller, was both courtly and polite. But firm. He seemed aware of all that occurred in the chamber around him. When he said, “Lunch is served in the Senate dining room,” it was a command, not an informational item.

In the Assembly, Jack O’Connell, most recently state superintendent of public instruction, had a knack for inserting a bit of levity at precisely the right moment either to diffuse some tension or lighten a tedious workday.

Prior to O’Connell, Assemblyman Mike Roos also had a light, sometimes mischevious touch. But when a legislator overstepped, Roos swatted them down, neutrally but firmly.

An instructive video might also be the last night of session in 1994 with Brown presiding, moving his house swiftly through the file, without caucus after endless caucus, smoothly handling last minute amendments and procedural issues.

Of course, Brown had been in the Assembly 30 years by that time, speaker for 14.

Channeling an inner Burton might not be the best strategy.

As Senate pro tem, Burton often forgot to turn the microphone off when engaging in private, profane conversations with other lawmakers.

Traditionally, no members ventured onto the rostrum while the Senate was in session, a policy the Rules Committee might consider reinstating.

Burton, always impatient, would try to speed through the Senate’s daily file by talking quickly.

The late Sen. Ken Maddy, the former GOP leader, once shook his head at Burton and said with a wry smile, “No matter how fast you go, it always takes the same amount of time.”