

## Tensions ease in WV Senate after blowup

By David Gutman

A day after a blowup over gubernatorial appointments looked like it would cause an already contentious legislative session to boil over into unmasked partisan obstruction, tensions cooled in the state Senate Thursday, and a deal has apparently been struck.

Republican and Democratic Senate leaders were cagey about how such a deal would play out, but the Senate functioned normally Thursday, after Democrats had threatened to slow the body's progress to a parliamentary crawl.

Republicans struck a conciliatory tone and hinted that they'd be willing to backtrack.

"In retrospect, maybe I would have done it differently," Senate President Bill Cole, R-Mercer, said on West Virginia MetroNews. Cole was firm that Republicans were permitted to act as they had, but said he had no idea that their actions would so enrage Democrats.

"I'm a reasonable person. I'm willing to talk to anybody," he said.

The brouhaha began when Republicans on the Senate Confirmations Committee rejected, without consultation or discussion, seven of Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin's appointments to executive boards and committees.

Rejecting such appointments is extraordinarily rare, especially without consulting with the governor or the opposition party.

In 2014, for example, the committee approved all but one of 173 appointments; the only one rejected was a Board of Dentistry nominee, over a potential conflict.

Almost all of the rejected nominees had close ties to the Democratic Party or to organized labor. Republicans on the committee said they had no reason for rejecting the appointees, and signaled that they were acting on instructions from Senate leadership.

After the blowup in the Confirmations Committee, Democrats briefly walked out of another committee meeting to meet and plan their next move.

They hinted that they might require every bill to be read in its entirety before it could be voted on, an action which any single senator can request.

That would have ground legislative action virtually to a halt. The Senate was scheduled to vote on 19 bills Thursday. The first of those, the budget bill, is 151 pages long.

At the beginning of Thursday's floor session, Senate Minority Leader Jeff Kessler, D-Marshall, gave a brief statement calling the rejections "petty and small."

"I think it was beneath the dignity of the Senate," Kessler said.

Immediately afterward, Senate Majority Leader Mitch Carmichael, R-Jackson, gave a statement about the importance of working in a bipartisan way.

“It is extremely important that we work together to move our state forward,” Carmichael said.

While legislative action is rarely swift, it proceeded as normal following those brief statements.

Carmichael said the Senate would consider the confirmations on Saturday.

Afterward, Carmichael stopped short of saying all seven rejected appointees would be confirmed, but said they would reconsider.

“Absolutely, we are completely open to the viewpoints of the minority and if we’ve made any mistakes that we want to correct,” he said. “We certainly de-escalated.”

Kessler said he thought all seven rejected appointees — including union leaders Elaine Harris and Kenny Perdue and state Democratic Chairwoman Belinda Biafore — would be appointed, provided that they still wanted the position. “I think some of them might just say ‘the heck with it now, it wasn’t worth my time and effort.’”

He said Republicans had apologized.

“I think they realize the mistake,” Kessler said of the Republicans. “There’s no reason to just drop that kind of a bombshell on us, or the governor, without some kind of discussion.”

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