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Head in the Game

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Astonishing the amount of diversion that has been built around a grain of truth in the controversy over who should be Speaker of the House for the 82nd Texas Legislature. That grain of truth: voters rejected a record number of incumbents and elected a bunch of new folks to serve in the 2011 Texas House. The rest of that story: we won't get the limited government those voters (TEA Party activists and others) are working for by returning to the failed leadership of the past.

Just when it seems the hazing of Speaker Straus can't get any worse, attacks spring anew. These efforts from the shadows resemble a circular firing squad with the current Texas House Speaker taking all the bullets. While voters take comfort in the new Republican super-majority in the Texas House, there's no guarantee we'll get conservative legislation. The inflammatory rhetoric lobbed by a handful of lobby-fueled and out-of-state critics aimed at defeating Speaker Straus in his bid to serve a second term as Speaker of the House has ignored some basic political truths:

- Republicans had lost seats in the Texas House in each session since Tom Craddick was chosen speaker in 2003. With Speaker Straus at the helm, the Republican Party majority grew from 76 seats to the unprecedented super-majority of 101 seats. Republicans originally achieved a majority in the Texas House after districts were redrawn following the last census. This was the first time since Reconstruction, in other words, since 1873 that Republicans had a majority in the Texas House and they then chose Tom Craddick as their speaker. Republicans held 88 of the 150 seats during that 2003 session.
- During the ensuing sessions, Texas Republicans lost seats in the House; giving up two seats and holding 86 for the 2005 session, losing 6 additional seats for the 2007 session and finally losing an additional 4 seats leaving a very slim majority of 76-74 for the 2009 session.

During that same time, the Texas budget more than doubled far exceeding growth in the Texas population and inflation. Ironically we saw this spending hike under the guidance of the same self appointed "conservative leaders" now attacking Speaker Straus.

- Texas debt also saw phenomenal growth and now knocks on our constitutional debt limit ceiling at a whopping \$38 billion (Texas will not be debt-free until 2049).
- Republicans in the Texas Legislature have a long road ahead to realize the expectations of TEA Party activists and Texas citizens, who sent a huge majority to the Texas House for the 2011 session. Red shirts are no guarantee of limited government.

The fomenting charges lobbed against Speaker Straus have come primarily from individuals and groups who held the reins of power in the Texas House from 2003 through 2008. Conservative Texans are asked to ignore the hard fact that more bills to protect the unborn or to fight illegal immigration died on their watch than on Speaker Straus's short tenure guiding a bitterly divided House. Critics have left no stone unturned in their effort to regain power – their tactics have included vicious misinformation and baseless rhetoric in an effort to seize control of the Texas House.

While many Straus attackers are arguing that political philosophy should be the basis for choosing the Speaker of the House, Robert's says "The presiding officer...should be chosen **principally for the ability to preside.**"ⁱ Henry M. Robert pointed out, "The great lesson for democracies to learn is for the majority to give to the minority a full, free opportunity to present their side of the case, and then for the minority, having failed to win a majority to their views, gracefully to submit and to recognize the action as that of the entire organization, and cheerfully to assist in carrying it out, until they can secure its repeal."ⁱⁱ

It seems we've forgotten the importance of debate and of seeking the wisdom of the assembly. Was it wise to choose and suffer under leaders who, while they may share the majority's philosophical ideals, without a requirement for justice, wield the power of the gavel as an iron fist? Remember how in 2003 the conservative base watched as issues like the rights of the unborn were used as bait to elect a majority, only to then use those same social issues as mere window dressing. Today's critics of Speaker Straus also failed then on public education reform, property tax appraisal caps and gave us disappointing ideas like the Trans-Texas Corridor.

Meanwhile, Speaker Straus has remained steadfast in his commitment to wield the gavel in a fair and just manner. He's [committed](#) to making sure that the will of the members and of the citizens of Texas be done in the coming session. Of course, we are asked to forget Speaker Straus' conservative credentials, and his work in Republican politics dating back to the Reagan administration. Apparently, his independent spirit is a problem for some people.

Thankfully, stalwarts like Kyleen Wright, chairman of the Texas Coalition for Life and Ed Hubbard, incoming president of a Harris Co. Republican Club, have recognized these attacks for what they are. Some of the strongest concerns surround Speaker Straus' position on pro-life issues. But Wright [says](#) a bill in the last session "was sabotaged by the same people who have been saying for years that they're all about saving babies," she said, repeating the same analysis she delivered at Republican clubs after the session.

"Instead of saving babies, they trivialized babies' lives by using the bill for political gain. Why isn't that a bigger problem for Republicans?"

Ed Hubbard has rightly [noted](#), "that this decision as to who should lead the House and choose its committee chairs really turns on whom the legislators believe will make the best leader, rather than on the doctrinal purity of each candidate's conservatism, and that decision is best left to those legislators." Hubbard sagely remarks, as "it has become more and more apparent that he [Straus] will be re-elected Speaker, the vitriol has increased to the point that it now appears that the anti-Straus mob outside the Capitol would rather mortally wound him, and, by extension, mortally wound the cohesion of our super-majority, even before the House is called into session, rather than allow the session to move forward and successfully address redistricting, balancing the budget through fundamental governmental reforms to reduce spending, ballot security and border security."

This is not the first session that Voter ID has been introduced in the Texas House, few should have expected it to fare any better in a 76-74 House than it fared in the 2007 80-69 House. Where were the Speaker Straus critics then?

This is not the first session that pro-life bills have not made it out of session. It's not the first time that the illegal immigration issue was not resolved. This is not the first session that property tax appraisal caps have not passed.

Straus is not perfect, no man, no candidate is. But from all reports he's wielded the gavel in a fair and just manner allowing the members to determine the direction of the legislative session and its outcomes.

As someone who was fed up long before there was a book about it, it pains me to see a tiny fraction of the political establishment exploiting the conservative movement and the work TEA Party activists have undertaken to save the Republic. I hope members of the Texas House will keep their head in the game; the job, ladies and gentleman, is fiscally responsible, limited and just government. You'll be much more likely to achieve that in a House run in a fair and just manner than in one ruled with an iron fist wielded

by those whose principal interest has been power and control. As Ben Franklin said, we either hang together or we'll hang separately.

ⁱ Robert III, Henry M. et al, Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 10th edition., p.433

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. XLIV