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FLORIDA CAPITOL VIEW

Speaker's moves leave a bad taste

Kennedy & Garcia
CAPITOL VIEW

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New House Speaker Marco Rubio has impressed a lot of people in Florida politics as someone who is intelligent, charismatic and quite possibly a future candidate for statewide office.

But now Rubio is beginning to draw some far less flattering reviews -- even comparisons in a few quarters to Johnnie Byrd, the most unpopular House speaker in recent memory.

The grumbling follows a week in which Rubio, R-West Miami, removed two Republican lawmakers from their leadership positions after they voted against the insurance package the Legislature approved in its just-completed special session. The bill passed the House 116-2.

Reps. Don Brown of DeFuniak Springs and Dennis Ross of Lakeland were forced to give up their posts as council chairmen -- the small group of legislators who make up most of the speaker's inner circle. Rubio replaced them with GOP Reps. Ron Reagan of Bradenton and Charlie Dean of Inverness.

In a three-sentence statement, Rubio said Brown and Ross "offered" their resignations. But Ross said he offered his only after the speaker told him to, and that Rubio did so because of his insurance vote. Brown would not discuss the matter.

The demotions aren't without precedent. In 2001, former House Speaker Tom Feeney, now a Republican congressman from Oviedo, stripped then-state Rep. Nancy Argenziano, R-Dunnellon, of a council chairmanship after she voted against nursing home legislation Feeney wanted.

Argenziano, however, had been an outspoken critic and active opponent of that bill -- she even sent a gift-wrapped, 25-pound box of cow manure to a lobbyist supporting it who Argenziano felt had been taunting her. Brown and Ross, by contrast, were largely restrained in their opposition to the insurance package.

Byrd himself demoted former Rep. Sandra Murman, R-Tampa, in 2003, after she broke ranks with her GOP colleagues on a vote over funding for women's health.

But Rubio's move stunned many people in the Capitol, especially because it came from someone who says, as Rubio so often does, that the Florida House should be an open and uninhibited forum for ideas and debate.

Rubio isn't talking about the changes. And his top deputies aren't saying much more.

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House Rules Chairman David Rivera, R-Miami, and Deputy Majority Leader Adam Hasner, R-Delray Beach, both pointed to Rubio's statement when reporters turned to them for a response. Rep. Dean Cannon, the Winter Park Republican in line to become House speaker himself in four years, would not comment.

But House Minority Leader Dan Gelber defended his counterpart. And Gelber, D-Miami Beach, said he expects the same discipline from his key people.

"When we take caucus positions on something, we do expect people to" support it, Gelber said.

"It's a responsibility that comes with leadership."

Nine and counting

It wasn't all bad news for the House speaker last week.

As Rubio made sure to note many times over, the new insurance legislation contains nine provisions that were included in his 100 Innovative Ideas for Florida's Future book.

Among the initiatives that made it -- most of which have been promoted by others, as well -- were requiring insurance companies to speed up payments for hurricane claims and offer homeowners policies with higher deductibles.

Just 91 ideas to go.

New job, same town

Former state Rep. Jim Kallinger, R-Winter Park, has landed a job in Gov. Charlie Crist's administration.

He has been hired as a senior program analyst in the Chief Child Advocate Office, which is housed in the governor's office.

Kallinger served two terms in the Florida House before losing a 2004 bid for a seat on the Orange County Commission.

More recently, Kallinger worked for the Christian Coalition of Florida.

School daze

Surveys show that Floridians are mostly disconnected from their government and even their own communities.

But a pair of state political icons want to change that.

Former U.S. Sen. Bob Graham, a Democrat who also was governor, and Lou Frey, a former Republican congressman from Orlando, are teaming up to urge an expansion of civics education in public schools.

"We think there is a serious problem in the way we are not preparing our citizens for civic involvement," Graham said.

The two met with Gov. Charlie Crist last week, who expressed support for their idea about teaching students more about state and local governments, volunteerism and other forms of civic involvement.

The pair also suggest adding civics education to the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).

"It's the only core subject that's not involved in the FCAT," Frey said.

For more insider information and insights on Florida politics, go to Central Florida Political Pulse at orlandosentinel.com/politicalpulse. John Kennedy can be reached at jkennedy@orlandosentinel.com. Jason Garcia can be reached at jrgarcia@orlandosentinel.com. Both also can be reached at 850-222-5564.

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