

Horton's

Michigan Notebook

Political & Social Commentary

January 6, 2019

The Michigan Inauguration: Beginnings & Endings

By Steve Horton

At the east entrance to the State Capitol grounds, welcoming one and all, is the statue of Austin Blair. A resident of Jackson, he was among those who founded the Republican Party when Whigs, Free Soilers, and dissatisfied Northern Democrats met at Under the Oaks in that city in July of 1854.

The party's main purpose, in its beginning, was to prevent the spread of slavery in the western territories and counter the power and influence of Southern slave states in Washington, D.C.

Blair became known as the "Civil War governor" due to his serving as the state's chief executive from 1861 through 1864.

Austin and many of his fellow Michiganders were ardent supporters of the union cause and took a hard line to any accommodations to the Southern states when they seceded. The new governor responded to President Lincoln's call for troops and Michigan's were the first to arrive at the nation's capital—much to the new president's relief.

He would go on to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives for six years during the



The Statue of Austin Blair, Michigan's 13th governor who served during the Civil War and helped found the Republican Party.

post-Civil War era (1867-73) and is remembered for being a champion of human rights for his opposition to capital punishment and his support of voting rights for blacks and women.

Times change, though, and in more recent years it's been the Democrats, or more

specifically the party's progressive wing, who have made civil rights for African-Americans and equal opportunities for women as priorities to be advocated and pursued through governmental legislation and social policies and who have pushed to expand the definition and scope of those rights and opportunities.

This more aggressive stance started with the administration of Franklin Roosevelt and picked up momentum after World War II.

In fairness, though, many Republicans, past and present, have also advocated these causes. Still the party, of late, is viewed by many as taking a more cautious and conservative approach to the expanded definition and expanded scope.

This shift is even more apparent with the Michigan Inauguration that we were about to witness on this New Year's morning. Beyond Blair's statue, a large stage had been erected in front of the Capitol building. There, starting at 10:30 a.m., various officials who had been elected to statewide offices, would be taking their oaths of offices.

These (as we watched the ceremony) included members of the three university boards and the state board of education, judges to the Michigan Court of Appeals, and justices to the Michigan Supreme Court.

But front and center stage were the swearing in and speeches by the state's four main executive-branch offices. Of the four, three of them raising their right hand and reciting their oaths were women: Dana Nessel, the new Attorney General; Jocelyn Benson, the new Secretary of State; and Gretchen Whitmer, Michigan's 49th governor. The other official and lone man would be Garlin Gilchrist, the first black to be elected as the state's lieutenant governor.

All four are Democrats.

The historical irony of Blair's stance, a founding father of the Republican Party, and Michigan's current situation is not lost. Which

is what makes history interesting and nuanced.

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DANIEL MULHERN, THE HUSBAND OF former governor Jennifer Granholm and Michigan's first First Gentleman, when interviewed for a news story about the impending inauguration, advised those attending to "dress warmly" and "be sure to be awe-struck."

My wife Dawn and I, in our plans to attend the event, heeded the former suggestion. As for being awe-struck, well sports reporters are not supposed to "cheer in the press box" and I suppose the same holds true for those of us covering governmental affairs.

The "awe struck" refers, of course, to the pomp and circumstance that attends this peaceful and orderly transfer of power; a shift of influence and decision-making from one set of individuals to another group and, in this case, from officials belonging to one political party to those affiliated with the other.

It is not the taking of power, however, that is the hallmark of our nation, but rather the relinquishing of those reins.

On the stage were Rick Snyder, the departing Republican governor, and his lieutenant governor, Brian Calley. Also in attendance were the Republican and Democratic leaders of the Michigan House and Senate.

With both of those legislative chambers still controlled by Republican majorities, the state government will (as they say) be divided for the next four years, and perhaps longer.

Whether compromise and common ground will be the rule rather than the exception, or instead gridlock takes hold remains to be seen. Many of us hope for the former; many fear for the latter.

Fueling the concern of inaction and divisiveness is the hard fact that there are partisan diehards—the bomb-throwers and ideological warriors—who view

accommodation and negotiation as a vice rather than a virtue. Whether their attitude will mute the voices of moderation and thwart efforts to work across the aisle also remains to be seen.

But on this day such concerns are idle speculation. The attorney general, secretary of state, lieutenant governor, and governor, in their respective speeches, conveyed the excitement and hope that comes with beginning a new adventure, a new challenge, and a new opportunity to shape policy and enact favored initiatives.

With their assumption of office, a different set of priorities and goals, coupled with a different approach and philosophy to governance, have taken place.

For the estimated two thousand-plus in attendance, either seated in the chairs in the roped-off reserve section or standing around the perimeter, most of them supporters of these officials, there is obvious elation, a celebratory mood, and an aura of anticipation for what might lie ahead.

They are the ones who knocked on doors, sought signatures on petitions, handed out pamphlets, made the phone calls, and attended the fundraising and meet-the-candidate events on behalf of a particular candidate or the party in general—and in this election their side won the majority vote.

The pendulum, having swung away from them in previous elections, has now swung back. For them and others who share their views, January 1st is not only a new year, but the dawn of a new morning—seemingly sunny and bright.

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A FEW DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS, my wife and I attended a different event. We had been invited to a surprise party for Joe Hune, the State Senator who hails from Fowlerville and would be leaving office at the end of the year due to term limits. The event

would be a way of saying “good bye” to this phase of his career.

Joe had already given his farewell speech on the floor of the Senate, one of the many senators who were also departing after serving the maximum of eight years in that chamber. Similar speeches were being given in the State House.

In his remarks, Hune expressed appreciation to his family, friends, and staff, highlighted what he considered his major accomplishment, and offered a few humorous and complimentary comments about several of his colleagues. Joe both honored and flattered Dawn and I by including us in his list of those he thanked and referring to us as “like family.”

Being invited to this party was a further honor and a chance to share this special occasion with a still-young man we’d known since he was a boy and watched grow up and then serve in the legislature.

The party was labeled as a “roast”. As such, several people—including past and present legislators of both parties—took turns speaking.

There were no sharp barbs, no unpleasant zingers. The ‘roast’ was more good-natured teasing mingled with heartfelt comments.

I also got up to speak and began by noting that the first year we started the *Fowlerville News & Views*, the year being 1985, we ran a front-page photo of two cute kids, cousins, who were serving as crown bearers for the Fowlerville High School Homecoming. They were Angie Risdon, age four, and Joey Hune, age five.

“I’m not sure if Angie ever got her picture in the paper again,” I said. “But little did we know that this would be the first of many appearances for young Mr. Hune. There were numerous photos of him during the next few years with his 4-H projects, usually a turkey, and then another front-page photo we took

when he was selected as the Homecoming King his senior year.

“When he graduated from high school, like a lot of young people who head off to college or other pursuits, I didn’t figure we’d see much of him,” I continued. “But, lo and behold, he decides to run for the State House at the age of 22. I didn’t think he had much chance, but then he ends up winning the primary after a recount by two votes and, once again he’s on the front page.”

I added that over the next six years as a state representative and then, after a two-year hiatus, another eight years as a senator, he had a weekly column in the newspaper, along with his photo appearing on a regular basis when he attended various events.

I had found one of those pictures of Joe, a photo taken when he was a young boy in 4-H, blew it up, and gave it to him.

I finished by saying, “My wife Dawn and I had great affection for the boy in this photo and a high regard for the man he has become. I don’t know how best to describe him when he was growing up, but to say he ‘wore his heart on his sleeve’ and was his own person. And that person was special and unique. He’s still special and unique.”

The party was held in what’s called the Governor’s Room. It’s near the Capitol and, I was told, serves as a gathering place for fundraisers and other events held by or on behalf of state officials.

On the walls are the photographs of past governors, including Harry Kelly, Kim Sigler, G. Mennen Williams, John Swainson, George Romney, William Milliken, James Blanchard, John Engler, Jennifer Granholm, and Rick Snyder. Pictures of both Republicans and Democrats who had headed our state government—the pendulum of power having swung back and forth over the years.

Joe is, if you’re not already well aware, a conservative Republican. Yet, as he noted in his farewell speech, “we do not hate each

other” in reference to his Democratic colleagues, adding, “I’ve always tried to befriend the Democratic leaders.”

He also pointed out that he had worked with Gretchen Whitmer when she was a Senator and they both (for a time) represented parts of Ingham County. The fact that one of those leaders, Jim Ananich, the Senate minority leader, was among those who spoke at the party was a testament to this friendship.

Joe, given his social and political beliefs, was likely disappointed with the recent overall election results. The opposite of the elation that, I’m sure, he felt after the 2016 vote.

But on this occasion, surrounded by wife and son, mother and father, and other family members, along with friends, staff members, and fellow legislators, it had to be a bittersweet moment...this ending of a way-of-life and bidding “good bye” to a career he enjoyed over the past 16 years.

As I sat at a table, listening to the others talk, I wondered what was going through the minds of the legislators in the room who, like Joe, would be leaving office in a few days. For a number of years each of them—in varying degrees of influence—had held the reins of power, been among the most important people in our state, and helped shape the governmental policies that directly or indirectly impacted the lives of some 10 million of their fellow Michiganders.

It is an awesome responsibility to be in that position. And quite a change to suddenly become an ex-public official.

I’m guessing that some of those leaving are more than ready to go on with their life’s next chapter, but for others, this loss of power and position is not exactly an “awesome” moment.

Endings, unlike beginnings, are not generally occasions of hope and excitement, but rather of remembering and reminiscing.

But, hopefully, they are accompanied with a sense of accomplishment as well.

But, whatever their mood is at this moment of transition, they did serve in state government. And while it's unlikely any of them will have a statue on the Capitol Square, like Austin Blair, they've now become part of Michigan's long and storied history.

While reporters aren't supposed to "cheer in the press box," I'm not a jaded newsman. The Inauguration, with its visible transfer of power, was an occasion to be awe-struck, but so too was the farewell party. One was a beginning, the other an ending. But each is important to acknowledge and celebrate and pay witness to.

As a Michigander, I thank all those public officials who have left office—our dear friend, Joe Hune, in particular—for their service and dedication, and I wish those officials who have just taken or re-taken their oaths of office my best wishes.

After all, it is not the beginnings or endings that matter most, but the continuing.

Steve Horton is the editor & publisher of the 'Fowlerville News & Views', a weekly newspaper in mid-Michigan. He is also the author of 'The Long Crossing: Selected Writings 1975-2014'.