
Q&A: CA Senate Sergeant-at-Arms, Tony Beard Jr.

Contributed by PT Editors
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The California Senate may lose a quarter of its members every two years via term limits, but Chief Sergeant-at-Arms Tony Beard Jr. remains at the helm. Following in his grandfather's and father's footsteps, he assumed the post 28 years ago at the age of 29. Today, many would argue that Beard is the legislature's deepest well of institutional memory remaining.

PT: As Sergeant at Arms of the Senate, you have a unique perspective on the legislative process. Tell us a bit about the tenor of the debate in the California Senate and the way business is conducted today.

Beard: The atmosphere is very collegial. A great level of respect is accorded to each individual for being a senator, as opposed to being a Democrat or a Republican. We try to maintain that, although no legislative body is without its partisan moments. Those moments are few and far between, however, and they usually don't arise without everyone knowing they're coming.

PT: Is there a tough learning curve for new members coming into the Senate when it comes to rules and decorum, or are they trained and coached in the operation of the institution once they get there?

Beard: Well, the vast majority of members come over from the Assembly, which by nature is a somewhat more raucous house given its 80 members. So, we hold meetings with the members and train them in the operation of the Senate and the differences between the Senate and the Assembly.

Sometimes in our efforts to educate new members, the most important thing is to convince them to just relax. Whether it's me, the Secretary of the Senate, or the director of personnel, we have to convince incoming members that we're not here to hurt them—we're here to help. When they come from a house that's a little more partisan in terms of its operation, it can be tough for them to believe that everyone doesn't have an ulterior motive. You have to be patient and continue to reassure them that there's not a lot to worry about and they can focus their attention on the business of the state.

PT: Have there been any significant changes in the way business is conducted in the Senate over the time that you've been there?

Beard: I think we've tried to streamline the process a little bit. We've tried to instill an attitude of, "Let's do business." Let's not waste time in non-productive debate. Certainly, if we're going to debate, let's do it, but let's make sure there's a product at the end instead of just letting 15 people get up and speak on every bill. Over the years, I think people have learned this.

Furthermore, with the new technology we have, it's easier to read the bill and understand what it does because you have a laptop computer right in front of you with all of the information you need. You have the entire, searchable history of a bill right there instead of an eight-inch book that literally had every physical version of the bill in it. In this sense, technology has advanced every legislator's ability to understand the subject matter they're considering, but that has its limits.

PT: When do those limits become most evident in the Senate?

Beard: It can be a clash of mindsets. We live in a push-button world; virtually anything can happen in a matter of seconds or minutes. Yet, our environment in the Capitol is still one of process, debate and amendments. It's dictated to be this way by the constitution for nothing more than the knowledge of the public, which we serve. It's set up to take time so the public has the opportunity to access the process and understand what's going on.

Getting people to understand when they call up and say, "This needs to happen now!" that it can't happen "now" can be difficult. Often, the reason it can't is because of the constitution. But when you look back at that, you have a public who tends to be less knowledgeable in civics and process and less participatory, and that hampers some members and staff in their efforts to get the word out about different bills.

PT: Is that immediacy greater in California than it might be in other states because there's so much going on?

Beard: California is unique in more ways than one. More than one tenth of the U.S. population lives within our borders

and the state's economy is the fifth largest in the world. The decisions taken here, even on the worst day, tend to have an impact. They tend to move east and be noticed, copied or used in ways that benefit other states, and frankly, Congress as well.

PT: Those are some rather high stakes for people coming into the legislature.

Beard: They are, and when you throw in the fact that people have to learn something so complex in—at best—14 years, I think it inhibits the process. These are smart people, but like any cross section of society, you have people who are good at it and people who aren't as good at it. So, you try to help the good ones become exceptional and those who aren't as proficient become better.

PT: Knowing the members as you do, would you say the public has a fair understanding of the people representing them in Sacramento?

Beard: It goes back to how people get here. It's the 30-second sound bite in the campaign that is supposed to say, "This is me." Well, no it isn't. It can't be. That cannot be the real person that got elected. It can't explain the humanness of people. "Oh really—that's you? Well, where have you made your biggest mistakes in life? Where did you have your greatest non-political triumphs?" Reliance on 30-second commercials paints an unfair picture of what's really required of these people.

As I tell people, we tend to expect a lot from our legislators, and yes, they've asked for the job, but they're people like anybody else. They give up family time. They lose families. They are susceptible to anything that might afflict any of us under stressful conditions—alcohol, drugs, depression. We have to learn to accept their humanness and understand that they are under a tremendous amount of pressure to make decisions that are significant for a great number of people.

On the other hand, members have to understand their position. As I tell members, look back at the 150 years California history and see how many people have sat in the desk you're in. The list is very short. Take that and realize it for what it is—it's pretty incredible and it's an honor. So, take that and do your absolute best to meet the expectations the public has for you.

PT: Has the level of respect for the institution remained constant over your time in the Senate, or has it waned?

Beard: I think it has. I just think the demands at times can be stressful. Just getting there is tough, the things that people have to go through to even become an elected official. You're subject to a lot of things—not necessarily unjustly so—but whether someone becomes harsher or more guarded or just blows it because of the stress, it has changed a great deal in that way.

PT: How about the legislature's relationship with the media? How has that changed and what are the implications for the legislative process?

Beard: The press used to have a physical presence here. The Associated Press, UPI, the LA Times—all of them used to have offices here in the building, and now all of that is gone. Part of that was due to the restoration of the building, but what were also lost were the relationships that used to exist between the press and the members. During my dad's era as Sergeant at Arms of the Assembly, they used to have a little coffee room off the floor where the press was allowed to sit and converse with the members. There was a level of mutual respect, even if something unflattering would ultimately be written.

That's essentially gone, and it's much more contentious now. Members are much more guarded, leading to the rise of the "press person," which has in turn evolved into the "message unit." What is it? It's immediacy. It's the 30-second sound bite. But when it comes to the business of the legislature, members take the rules and their responsibilities seriously. For me, it's a great place to work and it's never boring. Even on my worst days, protecting and serving this institution is a dream job.

PT: Mr. Beard, thank you for your time.

Tony Beard Jr. is the California Senate's Chief Sergeant-at-Arms.