

HOWARD P. RAWLINGS : 1937-2003

A rumbling voice of conscience in General Assembly



LLOYD FOX : SUN STAFF

Del. Howard P. Rawlings at the opening session of the Maryland General Assembly in 1998. He served for 25 years.

**Baltimore delegate
was tireless advocate for
social, fiscal responsibility**

Wielded great political power

**By SARAH KOENIG
AND DAVID NITKIN
SUN STAFF**

Howard Peters "Pete" Rawlings, a child of Baltimore public housing who rose to become one of the most powerful political leaders in Maryland, died yesterday at the University of Maryland Medical Center. He was 66 and had been battling cancer since 1999.

Mr. Rawlings spent a quarter-century representing the city in the General Assembly. With the mind of a trained mathematician and the fearlessness of a man certain of his convictions, he used his position as chairman of the House Appropriations Committee to bring change to his hometown and the state. Almost always, he bested adversaries who dared stand in his way.

He advocated affordable housing, orchestrated the restructuring of the city school system and doggedly pushed for legalizing slot machines as a way to pay for public education.

Along the way, his blessing became a valued commodity for aspiring politicians, turning him into something of a kingmaker in an era when machine politics was on the wane.

In 1999, he surprised many by withdrawing his backing from an African-American candidate and instead endorsing Martin O'Malley for mayor — a move that immeasurably bolstered the then-councilman's chances. In 2002, Mr. Rawlings guided Lisa A. Gladden's successful run for the state Senate against incumbent Barbara A. Hoffman, a longtime colleague.

Despite many surgeries and treatments for his illness, which spread from his bladder to other parts of his body, Mr. Rawlings remained a vital player in Annapolis until his death. Although he missed a key budget debate this year, his position as chairman placed him at the center of the session's vexing financial issues.

"I think he'll go down as one of the most significant legislative leaders of his era," said House Speaker Michael E. Busch. "His influence on issues of education and higher education are probably unparalleled in this state."

A tearful Mr. O'Malley, surrounded by members of the City Council and Baltimore's legislative delegation, said the city had lost a devoted public servant.

"This is a very sad day for the people of [See Rawlings, 8A]

More inside

Gregory Kane: For Rawlings, math, education and accountability added up.
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"A politician worries about the next election. A true statesman worries about the next generation, and children yet unborn, and that was Pete Rawlings."

U.S. Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, a Baltimore Democrat and chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus

A man unafraid to wield presence, power

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Baltimore," he said. "Baltimore has lost a great giant of a man, and I have lost a close personal friend."

Funeral arrangements were incomplete last night.

A math professor, Mr. Rawlings ended his academic career as assistant to the president of Baltimore City Community College. Even before he entered politics, he was an activist for civil rights, higher education and services for the poor.

Soon after his election to the House of Delegates in 1978, he became known as one of the few people in the 188-member General Assembly who actually understood the nuances of Maryland's finances. In 1992, he was named Appropriations Committee chairman, giving him substantial influence on the budget and, therefore, on state policy.

Power of purse strings

Mr. Rawlings could, and did, direct money to projects in Baltimore important to him and to his constituents. And he was known to unabashedly withhold funds from pet projects of legislators set on blocking bills he favored.

A prime example was a painful debate in 1997 over the reorganization of the city's public schools. "If this bill goes down, all their school construction money is coming out of the budget," he said of his opponents. "They won't get anything



Del. Howard P. Rawlings speaks to House Commerce and Government Matters Committee in 2000 on racial profiling. At left, Dels. Talmadge Branch, Lisa A. Gladden.

LINDA COAN : SUN STAFF

money is coming out of the budget," he said of his opponents. "They won't get anything. Not a dime."

Perhaps more than any other issue, the city schools reform debate solidified his reputation as a leader willing to stand resolutely in the face of criticism. Lawmakers, black clergy and the national NAACP criticized the plan to relinquish some of the city's control of the schools in exchange for an increase in state aid. But Mr. Rawlings pushed the measure through.

"A politician worries about the next election. A true statesman worries about the next generation, and children yet unborn, and that was Pete Rawlings," said U.S. Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, a Baltimore Democrat and chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus. "It takes a lot of guts to disregard the criticism that goes along with doing what is right."

Blunt rhetoric

A tall man of large girth, Mr. Rawlings made good use of his presence. He spoke slowly, his voice a rumble that emanated from deep within. The effect was such that when he rose on the House floor, everyone knew he meant business. Even as his body was weakening, his blunt rhetoric never did.

"We have failed, ladies and gentlemen, we have failed at the most important task before us," he said in March, presenting the budget. "That is the task of putting our fiscal house in order and putting the state on a course to structural budget balance. ... We are leaving a hell of a lot undone."

He once said of then-City Council President Lawrence A. Bell III, "He's a child. He behaves like a child. He thinks like a child."

Friends said on the other side of such withering criticism was a soft-hearted man, devoted to his family, and with a fine sense of humor. Watching him gravely preside over Appropriations meetings, few might have guessed this was the same man who giggled uncontrollably with two white, conservative pals two decades ago in the same committee until a chairman separated them.

'A lovely smile'

Mr. Rawlings was known for the range of his expressions. Like a seasoned actor, he used his face as a second voice — conveying incredulity, disdain, mock horror, cunning and sometimes just a love of the political game.

"He had a lovely smile. He would smile, and his whole face would light up," said Comptroller William Donald Schaefer, who worked with Mr. Rawlings and sometimes clashed with him when Mr. Schaefer was Baltimore's mayor and Maryland's governor. "But when he was mad, you would know it. It was like a thunderstorm."

Casper R. Taylor Jr., House speaker for much of Mr. Rawlings' career and a close friend, said Mr. Rawlings never relented on an issue he believed in, even when it was unpopular among some in the black community or other state leaders.

Del. Howard P. Rawlings speaks to House Commerce and Government Matters Committee in 2000 on racial profiling. At left, Dels. Talmadge Branch, Lisa A. Gladden.



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Washington, D.C., police arrest Howard P. Rawlings (right) and Wendell F. Phillips after the two House of Delegates members took part in a protest at the South African Embassy in 1985.

Soon after the city schools debate, Mr. Rawlings pushed in 1998 to create a management oversight panel for Prince George's County schools, the worst-performing in the state after Baltimore. That advocacy angered many of his African-American colleagues.

A year later, concerned that his alma mater was not using state funds effectively, he called for a performance audit of Morgan State University. Influential school administrators were not pleased.

"His attitude was always that somebody in his community had to do this. And he did it," Mr. Taylor said. "His political courage certainly stands out in my mind."

In 2001, Mr. Rawlings weighed in at a critical juncture to topple the candidacy of then-Gov. Parris N. Glendening, who was positioning himself to become chancellor of the state university system. Mr. Rawlings was co-author of a letter that nominated several educators with Maryland ties, including the current chancellor, William E. Kirwan.

"Regrettably, Governor Glendening wasn't on the list," Mr. Rawlings said at the time.

Mr. Rawlings was born in Baltimore on March 17, 1937, a son of Howard Toussaint and Beatrice Peters Rawlings. His father was a custodian at the old Hutzler's and Hochschild-Kohn department stores and later worked at the U.S. Post Office. He and his siblings grew up in public housing, in what was then the newly constructed Edgar Allan Poe Homes on North Fremont Avenue.

In a 1986 interview, Mr. Rawlings explained how the experience made him a diehard advocate for adequate housing for the poor, an issue he championed during his earliest days in the legislature.

"The housing was decent. It was clean. We had a nice bathroom, a nice kitchen. ... I don't



BARBARA H. TAYLOR : SUN STAFF
Despite treatment for cancer, Del. Howard P. Rawlings continued to attend General Assembly sessions.

remember things falling from the ceiling, plumbing that wasn't working," he said of the Poe Homes.

"There were six of us, and there were three of us in a bed — life was good, and secure and safe there. Everyone was part of your family. You did something wrong and Ms. Bailey or Ms. Jones or Ms. Nelson told you not to do it. If you did it, you heard about it. And we had good adult role models, men who would kick our butts if we didn't do right."

He graduated from Douglass High School and earned a bachelor's degree from Morgan State and a master's in mathematics from the University of Wisconsin. He studied for his doctorate at the University of Maryland but never completed it.

State Del. Salima S. Marriott, who shared Mr. Rawlings' district, said his childhood helped direct his legislative priorities. "His experience of having grown up in the Poe Homes says to him, 'Everyone can achieve academically, and there's something wrong when they don't,'" she said.

He was married for nearly 40 years to the former Nina Cole, a pediatrician. The couple had

three children, Wendell Rawlings, Lisa Rawlings and Stephanie C. Rawlings Blake, a Baltimore city councilwoman.

By the 1970s, Mr. Rawlings had gained a reputation as someone apt to raise his voice in outrage — or file a lawsuit — over discrimination, especially in higher education. He launched effective public fuses over admissions requirements and hiring practices at the University of Maryland, alleged scholarship abuse on the part of state senators, the under-funding of Coppin State College and the lack of blacks on the state Board of Regents. His activism ultimately led to Maryland's higher education desegregation plan.

'Verda's boys'

In 1978, he was working as director of a health advocacy group, a job that took him to Annapolis. There, he realized, he could change policy more significantly from inside. Sen. Verda F. Welcome, a political powerhouse in Baltimore, put him on her ticket that year. He was re-elected six times.

"He and I were known as Verda's boys," said NAACP President Kweisi Mfume, the former legislator and congressman. "She kind of tapped me and tapped Pete. I don't know why, she kind of selected us. Nobody gave either of us a chance to get elected. ...

"I lost a friend, and a sidekick," Mr. Mfume said.

Early in his legislative career, Mr. Rawlings made housing his bailiwick. He formed what some saw as an unlikely partnership with Anne S. Perkins, another freshman delegate, who had grown up in a wealthy Baltimore family. Together they pushed for reform that led to the formation of a state housing policy commission.

Every Sunday evening, Ms. Perkins said, she would expect a call from Mr. Rawlings, who had

been on the phone all weekend with the House speaker and other key lawmakers, picking up gossip and discussing strategy.

"Pete always had a much stronger sense of the political talking back and forth you needed to do to get things done," she said. "He had a tremendous amount of energy."

When he was appointed Appropriations chairman, he became the state's first African-American to lead a fiscal committee. Del. Samuel I. Rosenberg, a subcommittee chairman under Mr. Rawlings, said that although the committee's description of its budget proposal — "fiscally prudent and socially responsible" — became a State House cliché, Mr. Rawlings took it very seriously.

"He'd say, 'We've got to do these cuts, but let's at least do one or two or three progressive things, too.' That was really important to him," Mr. Rosenberg said.

'Hard on everybody'

Said Barbara Hoffman, his long-time counterpart as chairman of the Senate budget committee, "He didn't cut anybody any slack, and that didn't always make him friends. ... He was hard on everybody, but he wanted everybody to do the best they could do."

Colleagues said he remained actively involved in public affairs up to his final days, giving assignments to political allies from his hospital bed. "He gave us all marching orders," said Ms. Gladden. As recently as Sunday night, she said, Mr. Rawlings dictated to her a letter he wanted sent.

Although his name sometimes came up as a possible candidate for House speaker, or even mayor, Ms. Marriott believes he was happiest running his committee. "He went to the legislature, in my mind, to become chairman of the Appropriations Committee," she said. "He knew he would have a lot of influence."

To the end of his legislative career, Mr. Rawlings maintained his focus on education — especially on how to pay for it. Although he at one time vigorously opposed the state lottery, he eventually became a leading advocate for legalizing slot machines to pay for public schools.

Loss to city and state

His stature grew after last year's elections — the first under legislative maps redrawn to reflect Baltimore's population loss over the decade. Ms. Hoffman was defeated, as were several other city incumbents, with political clout shifting to the Washington suburbs. That made Mr. Rawlings, long one of the city's strongest voices for a share of the pie, even more important.

"The loss of him as a committee chairman will be a serious loss to the state," said Mr. Schaefer, "but a much more serious loss to the city."

Sun staff writers Michael Dresser, Ivan Penn and Laura Vozzella contributed to this article.

REMEMBERING PETE RAWLINGS

"He was not one who suffered fools well, nor did he like to have his goals challenged too much. He was interested in progress and in moving forward relentlessly. ... But he did it in the interests of his constituents. It was not about Pete."

Chief Judge Robert M. Bell

"He could stand up to the governor. He could stand up to the House leadership. He could stand up to the other house. ... He was a great ally but also a great antagonist when he didn't agree with you."

Former Gov. Parris N. Glendening

"In most instances, politics change people. Pete was a person who changed politics. ... It was never a job for him. It was a passion."

NAACP President Kweisi Mfume

"Pete was always respectful of my role in the legislative process and had an uncanny ability to look for the Republican point of view and use it to advance his agenda."

Former Del. Robert L. Flanagan

"Even if you didn't agree with him, you respected that he knew what he was talking about and very much appreciated the sincerity of his words and views."

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller