

The Boston Globe

Finneran emerges as party's weapon

By Raphael Lewis

Sunday, August 15, 2004

It's an image that makes Republican strategists salivate: House Speaker Thomas M. Finneran, Beacon Hill's most controversial power broker, glad-handing at fund-raisers with fellow Democratic lawmakers, telling crowds how close he has grown to his colleagues, how important it is to reelect them.

But even as Republicans brand him as the personification of problems on Beacon Hill, and as federal prosecutors continue to investigate allegations that he lied under oath, Finneran has emerged as the House Democrats' weapon of choice to beat back a surprisingly strong Republican challenge this year.

Since Feb. 1, the House speaker from Mattapan has shown up at 36 fund-raisers and other constituent events staged by House Democrats, helping lesser-known colleagues draw crowds and much-needed campaign contributions, many from lobbyists and others more interested in endearing themselves to Finneran than the event's host.

By Election Day, Finneran will have helped raise "several hundred thousand dollars," the state Democratic Party chairman says, and the speaker's two campaign accounts will donate thousands more. That's crucial, given that the Democratic Party has fallen far behind the Republicans and Governor Mitt Romney in fund-raising.

"Tommy is absolutely essential to our success in the fall," said Democratic Party chairman Philip W. Johnston. "We need a counterbalance to Romney's power, and he can provide that."

The Republicans respond with glee: "We welcome the speaker's involvement because he embodies everything that's wrong with Beacon Hill," said Timothy O'Brien, executive director of the state Republican Party. "He is the poster child for patronage, waste, and blocking the governor's reforms at every turn."

With Romney and the GOP fielding more than 100 Republican House and Senate candidates, Finneran has seemed jovial in his public appearances, arguing that he has a compelling message -- and that he's a compelling messenger -- to turn back the Romney challenge. Voter polls may show him as unpopular, he said, but House lawmakers know how effective he can be in the game of retail politics.

"The odds are 50-50 that they'll like me or 'That [expletive], I can't stand him,' " Finneran said in a lengthy interview with the Globe. "But if I get the chance to stand there and talk for five minutes, the odds are shifting rapidly in my favor. And it's going to be 90-10, they're going to say, 'Geez, he's a good guy.' "

Finneran, 54, speaker since 1996, has signaled that he would be open to moving on from the speaker's chair, possibly to a job in the John F. Kerry administration if Kerry wins the White House. Careful to keep hold of his power, though, he has stressed that he will run for speaker again this January, and has shown interest in touting his accomplishments -- and his political pull.

"For many members, it's not a drag" to have him appear with them on the stump, Finneran said. "It's, 'Gee, he or she has a good relationship with the speaker,' or 'Gee, I met the speaker; he's a different guy than the guy I read about in the newspaper, you can approach him.' "

Finneran's pose of undaunted confidence comes after a rocky year. In April, the Globe disclosed that the FBI is probing allegations that Finneran lied under oath during a federal trial last year regarding the 2001 House redistricting plan -- a plan the court threw out because it allegedly watered down the voting power of minorities. Finneran vigorously denies the allegation.

Then, over his objections, gay marriage became legal in Massachusetts on May 17. The ever-cautious Finneran failed to persuade his colleagues to pass his own plan to ban gay marriage during a constitutional convention a few weeks earlier.

Later, a proposal to create universal health insurance moved forward despite his opposition. Then, last week, two of his top lieutenants took the unusual step of acknowledging they would run for speaker if Finneran stepped aside -- a rare admission in a House that demands loyalty to Finneran.

Despite all that, Finneran says he is as effective as ever, both on the House floor and on the campaign trail.

"In and around the turmoil of the constitutional convention, the gay marriage issue, and of course the issue of redistricting -- the issue of which I dare not speak -- in the early months, I think there was a question, 'Gee, is the speaker going to be able to provide a sense of direction and focus to the institution?' " Finneran said. "Notwithstanding the fact that people are penning what I call speculative obituaries, I think . . . the totality of the session is in my mind phenomenally productive."

Faced with Romney's calls for "reform" of state government, Finneran and other Beacon Hill Democrats this year passed legislation that they call "real reform." That agenda, he and other lawmakers say, included a new school building program that is designed to limit costs while still steering millions to needy

districts. It also includes the first steps toward a broad preschool education program that he estimates could cost another \$100 million next year.

A self-described fiscal conservative, Finneran pushed through a proposed constitutional amendment that would earmark a portion of state revenues to a 'rainy day' fund in the event of a dramatic economic downturn. Should it survive a vote in the Legislature next year, and a statewide ballot question after that, Finneran said he would regard the legislation as perhaps his most important legacy.

But, with the power to make or break legislation, Finneran's greatest clout may lie with the donors who can help pay for the campaigns of his colleagues -- even the lawmakers who have carefully cultivated images as independent voices on Beacon Hill.

When a neophyte politician can draw 100 people paying \$100 each to a fundraiser because Finneran's name is on the guest list, the slings and arrows are worth it, Democratic lawmakers say. Last week, for example, he attended a fundraiser for Representative Colleen M. Garry, a Dracut Democrat, and earlier he appeared with another newcomer.

"I'm a fairly new lawmaker, so I'm always concerned about what to charge at an event," said Representative Patricia A. Haddad, a Somerset Democrat in her second term. "I had him at my first \$100-a-head event, and I had an amazing draw. We are a blue-collar district, but he walked into that room, immediately began working it, and he just connected with them. You feel like you're talking to someone who could become you're very good friend, like he's been there before."

To some Beacon Hill observers, Finneran's insistence on maintaining a high profile throughout the campaign season is typical of his hallmark stubbornness. And Finneran, himself, said he's more than happy to prove wrong all of those wishing to see him fall from power.

"Maybe other people would have been distracted or weighed down" by a federal perjury investigation, Finneran said. "I've given it to the attorneys, the attorneys are going to handle it, and I'm very, very confident about the outcome."

He is beginning to shape next year's agenda, but first, he says, he has to ensure that his Democratic colleagues are reelected en masse.

"I think some people believe that you fall across the finish line and you're done at the end of a session, but that's not the case at all," Finneran said. "You shift. It's about providing information, resources, and ideas to members. It's a fundamental responsibility of being a legislative leader."