

CHAPTER 10

SETTING UP THE STATE ASSEMBLY

An enormous number of large and small organizational tasks must be carried out successfully in order for a candidate for statewide office to make a good showing at a party state assembly. This process began for the Bird for Governor campaign on April 26, 1994, when Bird campaign manager Jim Scherer attended an organizational meeting for the Republican State Assembly that was held at Republican state party headquarters in Denver. Accompanying Scherer to the meeting were Bill Stokes, who was going to "produce" the floor demonstration for Mike Bird at the state assembly, and Michelle Provaznik, the Bird campaign scheduler and finance director.

BANNER POSITION

The first order of business was drawing numbers out of a hat to decide which candidate would get the best spot to hang a banner. There was a second drawing to see which candidate would address the state assembly first. Michelle Provaznik drew the numbers for the Bird campaign, and she put her hand in the hat twice and drew out number one both times. On seeing her phenomenal luck, Jim Scherer suggested that she immediately leave to try her luck with the roulette wheels and crap tables at Las Vegas, Nevada.

Banner position is an important issue at a state assembly. Candidates for the party nomination for governor will not be taken seriously if they do not have a large, wall-sized banner hanging in a prominent position in the assembly hall. The best thing to have is a large banner hanging down from a wire stretched across the assembly hall at a readily visible height above the delegates' heads. As would be expected, those were the first banner positions to go in the drawing between gubernatorial candidates for the 1994 Republican State Assembly.

The Mike Bird team ran into something of a surprise at this meeting

to determine banner position and speaking order at the Republican state assembly. Bruce Benson, who had repeatedly said he was not going to put his name in contention at the state assembly, sent a woman to represent his interests at the meeting. The woman was not Katy Atkinson, Benson's campaign manager, but someone whom the Bird team had never seen before.

The real surprise was that Republican state party officials said that she could have for Benson the best banner position available after the selections had been made for Mike Bird and Dick Sargent. Ordinarily the Bird representatives would have complained long and loud about Benson, who probably was not even going to attend the assembly, having a banner in a prominent position. Since the Bird campaign had drawn first choice on banner position, however, it was decided to do the politic thing and drop all opposition to a nonparticipant such as Bruce Benson getting a good banner location.

SPEAKING ORDER

More surprising yet was the fact that Benson's representative kept saying that Bruce Benson "might put his name in at the assembly." She thus wanted to get Bruce Benson a spot in the speaking order. Republican state party leaders were adamantly opposed to this Benson plan, however. They stated that only candidates officially putting their names in contention at the state assembly could draw and be placed in the speaking order. If Bruce Benson should decide at a late date to put his name in contention at the state assembly, he would have to be nominated and give a speech after all the other candidates had been nominated and had spoken. Benson would have to make his move at the very end of the nominations portion of the assembly when the assembly chairperson would turn to the delegates and say: "Are there any other nominations?"

VOTING PROCEDURE

State party leaders announced there would be preprinted computer punchcard ballots distributed to delegates at the state assembly and that these ballots would be voted by punching a hole in the card next to the name of the candidate for whom the delegate was voting. The punchcards would then be collected and tabulated by machine. This meant that, if Benson put his name in contention at the state assembly at the last minute, the votes for him would have to be "write-in" votes. Delegates wishing to vote for Benson would punch no holes in their punchcards but would simply write Bruce Benson's name across the card instead.

The knowledge that "write-in" votes could be cast for Bruce Benson at the state assembly caused warning bells to go off in the heads of the Mike Bird campaign staffers. There was a possibility that Bruce Benson might stage a last minute attempt to get a large number of "write-in" votes at the state assembly. If he received enough votes (30 percent or more of the total) to qualify for the Republican primary ballot, he could then accept the nomination to the ballot and give an acceptance speech to the assembly - and even hold a small demonstration at that time if he wanted to. If Benson did not receive enough "write-in" votes to qualify, he could call getting any votes at all a moral victory and then let his petition signatures put him on the ballot.

One thing the Bird campaigners learned from this meeting at Republican state party headquarters was that Bruce Benson was holding all the cards where his participation at the state assembly was concerned. No matter what he decided, he was going to have a large banner in a prominent, if not the very best, location. At any time, the day before the assembly began if he wanted to, Benson could announce he was putting his name in contention at the assembly and then try to get "write-in" votes.

The Bird campaign really would have no assured knowledge of exactly what Benson was going to do until, literally, the state assembly was called to order and the nominating process at the assembly was under way. As a result of this situation, the Bird campaign had to

prepare for two distinct possibilities - that Bruce Benson would not put his name in contention at the assembly, and that he would.

Despite this, the organizational meeting at Republican state headquarters had been a big success for the Bird campaigners. Mike Bird would have the best banner location in the entire hall -hanging right in the center above the delegates' heads - and Mike Bird would be the first candidate for governor to address the assembly. An additional bonus was that, because Bird was going to address the assembly first, his name would automatically be listed first on the punchcard ballots.

EQUIPPING THE ARENA

The Bird for Governor campaign staff continued working with Republican State Party Headquarters as the date of the Republican State Assembly in Denver drew ever nearer. State headquarters hired a private firm to put up spotlights, hang signs, and otherwise equip McNichols Arena for the assembly. At the last minute the private firm backed out when they found they could not do the work profitably for the price they had bid. Republican state headquarters then told the Bird and Sargent campaigns that they would have to pick up these sorts of expenses.

Some members of the Bird campaign staff wondered aloud if the Benson people had something to do with putting all these assembly hall expenses on the Bird and Sargent campaigns. On second thought, it seemed to be the sort of typical snafu that comes along in political party operations. Nonetheless, the Bird campaign's state assembly manager, Bill Stokes, sternly lectured Mike Hesse, the state party executive director, for fouling up the process of equipping McNichols Arena.

BELLS A'RINGING

Bill Stokes also became concerned when he was told that state Republican headquarters was going to have tables on the state assembly

stage with people sitting at them with telephones. "You are not going to have people on the stage answering telephones while Mike Bird is addressing the assembly," Bill Stokes told Mike Hesse. As a result of Stokes's efforts, the tables with telephones on the stage were removed from the state assembly plans.