

Saints, education votes gave Edwards boost

EDWIN EDWARDS won two key (and for this session, rare) victories in the Legislature last week: Senate passage of the appointed superintendent of education bill bodes well for Louisiana's long-term economic development; approval by the Legislature of the Saints relief deal bodes even better for Edwards' short-term peace of mind. Together, they could go a long way toward curing a crisis of confidence that has plagued this session.

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THE HEAD count on the Senate bill to change the superintendent of education from an elected position to an appointed one was so close to the two-thirds majority needed that Gov. Edwards dispatched a state police helicopter to New Orleans to fetch ailing Sen. Nat Keifer, who only weeks before was near death in his battle with a liver illness.

The usually listless Senate stirred when the 46-year-old Keifer appeared from the entrance behind the president's dais and looked out into the faces of his colleagues, most of whom had thought they would never see Nat in the Senate again. What they saw now was a haunting figure: Frail, ashen and gaunt, stark in contrast to

the memory of the irrepressible, gregarious Keifer, one of the all-time most effective administration floorleaders, whose swagger once filled the chamber. Keifer spoke, comparing the Senate to a big football team and concluded, "I've been away too long." Senators checked their tears as they rose to applaud. High drama. But this is politics, not TV. When the question was called, the appointed bill fell one vote short.

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BUT THE point was made. Edwin Edwards was intent on passing this bill and would bring this poor, sick man back again if he needed to do it. He didn't. When the vote was reconsidered the next day, three senators switched to give the governor his two-thirds majority. Indecision on the Senate's part? No, more an indication of how low Superintendent Tom Clausen's stock has fallen at the Capitol. For though Clausen sat glowering through the debate with labor chieftan Victor Bussie staunchly at his side, it was clear these two hadn't the hold on their votes that the governor had on his. The three senators, men of their words, had promised to vote with Clausen . . . on Tuesday. Sorry about

Wednesday.

Education reformers like business lobbyist Ed Steimel were heartened by the governor's resolve to stay on the floor of the Senate and see this matter through. Probably more so than Edwards, who, standing at the

side steps of the chamber, vented his mild pique, "It's hypocritical of the system that I have to be down here. The Legislature has the responsibility to make its own decision, one way or the other, without me. But they're telling me if I leave, four votes will switch, so I have to stand here and watch them."

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ALL HYPOCRISY aside, two days later in the House, Edwin Edwards went not to the floor but to the mike to save his sinking Saints' tax relief bill. He did, convincing the House to

overturn a pesky amendment that could have scrapped the whole Saints' sale and prolonged Edwards' four-month ordeal. "I don't even like pro football," he told the House, "but I do like this state and I think it's important to keep this team."

The representatives were not as certain. Even among those personally sympathetic to the \$2.5 million in state revenue concessions to the new Saints' owners, many were wary of widespread constituent opposition to the deal. But the governor's lobbying was relentless. Though he hadn't the budget goodies this year to dispense to cooperative legislators, he could still wield the threat of budget vetoes at his opponents.

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EDWARDS PULLED it out in the end, thus getting a big monkey off his back. But it was one he put there in the first place. From the time in January the governor mentioned the state may have to buy into the Saints for up to \$25 million to keep them in New Orleans, he and legislators have been shelled by virulent grass roots opposition, especially from Central and North Louisiana.

One battle is not over, however, the appointed superintendent, bill is

likely to find more favor in the conservative, business-dominated House. The Saints contract was waved through the liberal Senate as expected.

Disparate as they are, the resolution of these two issues may clear the tracks to get this semi-stalled legislative session rolling. Resolving the leadership crisis in education is essential for teacher pay raises and other school reforms. Having the acrimonious Saints deal behind us should serve to mend for now the bitter and historic division between the Isle of Orleans and the rest of the state.

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PLUS, EDWIN Edwards showed that investigations and falling popularity notwithstanding he can still be a forceful, effective leader and that the state doesn't work well without one.

Yes, the dynamics of Louisiana politics are changing, nowhere more evident than in the Legislature, but for now, hypocritical or not, when this state faces a major policy shift, as in education, or has to swallow a distasteful pill, as with the Saints deal, it won't happen unless the governor comes down to the floor to fight it.