In Alabama, Senate Ends Bitter Rift Over Leader

By DAVID FIRESTONE

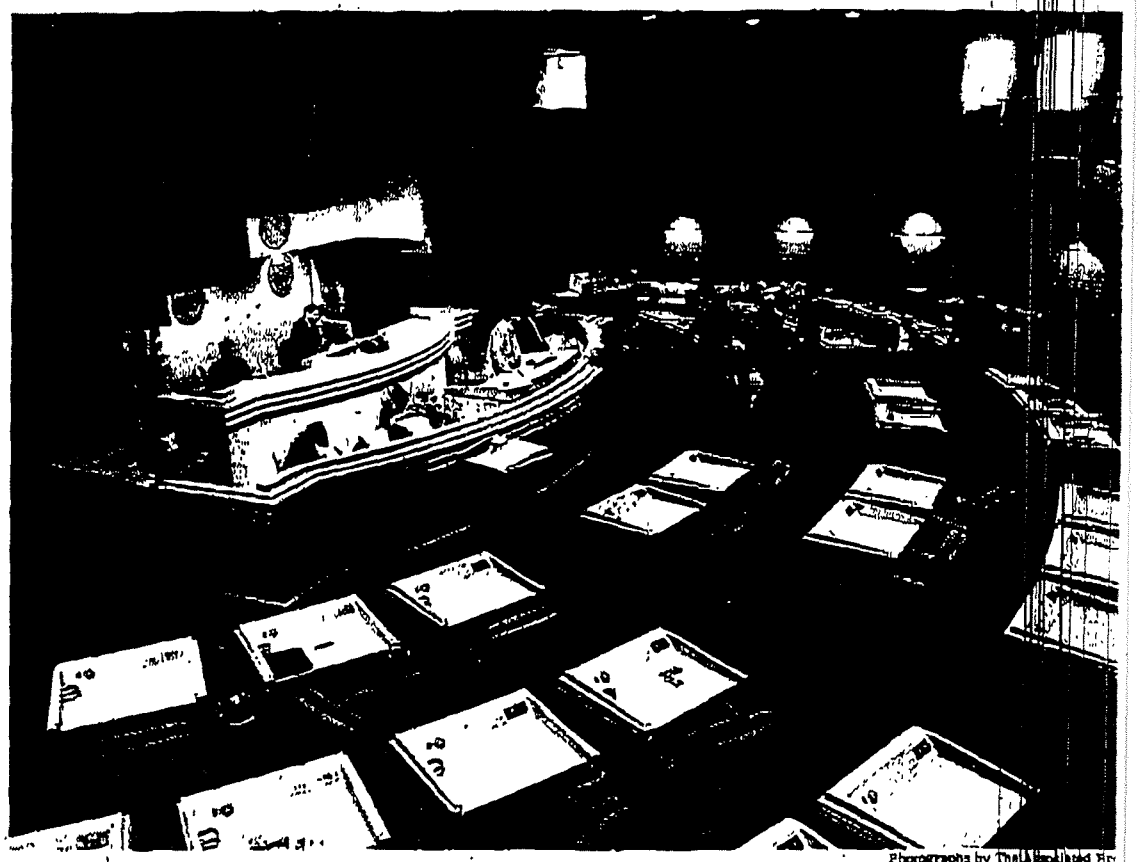
ATLANTA, March 30 — After a month of fierce factional deadlock and ridicule, the Alabama Senate today found its way out of the procedural chaos that had prevented any legislation from being passed and threatened to paralyze state government.

Faced with a deadline that was jeopardizing Gov. Donald Siegelman's first-year legislative agenda, the Governor's Democratic allies agreed to return some of the power that they had stripped from the Lieutenant Governor, Steve Windom, a Republican. In exchange, Mr. Windom agreed to share control over the Senate with Democratic leaders.

As a result of the compromise, senators agreed to end the lawsuits, the talk of impeachment and the personal recriminations that many legislators said represented a new low in Alabama politics, which has never been known as a model of high-minded public policy. When the Senate reconvenes next Tuesday, it will have 18 days to pass a state budget and consider the Governor's plan for a state lottery. (State law limits the Legislature's session to 30 working days, 12 of which were used up in the dispute.)

The paralysis began in January, when Democrats backed by Governor Siegelman — who have a slight edge in the Senate — voted to strip the Lieutenant Governor of the power to make committee assignments and direct the flow of legislation (the Lieutenant Governor had five Democrats supporting him). That power has traditionally been vested in the lieutenant governor, but when Mr. Windom was elected in November as the first Republican in that office in this century, he threatened to hold up some of Mr. Siegelman's legislative agenda.

After losing his power, Mr. Windom took some unusual actions to regain it. On March 3, after an ally in the Senate moved to restore his power, Mr. Windom declared that the Senate had unanimously approved the measure on a voice vote, despite a platoon of screaming Democrats voting no. The noise, which frightened one little girl in the gallery to tears, also scared the Governor, who realized that his agenda could be threatened if Democrats, who began to boycott the Senate sessions, could not reach agreement with Mr. Windom's faction.



Photographs by The Associated Press

Only a few senators gathered at the Alabama Statehouse earlier this month after Democrats boycotted when Senate factions deadlocked over the leadership of Lieut. Gov. Steve Windom, a Republican, at left.



Mr. Siegelman called a special session of the Legislature to solve the dispute, but tension ran so high that Mr. Windom refused to leave the chamber even for a bathroom break during the round-the-clock session, lest Democrats find a way to replace him. To illustrate his plight, Mr. Windom announced on Sunday that he felt obliged to urinate in a jug behind the podium during the negotiations, and the remark was picked up by headline writers, radio talk shows and national television programs, making the situation appear ridiculous.

But after today's compromise, Mr. Windom declared that all the bad publicity was worth it, and even took what he called a "people's gavel victory lap" by plane around the state to announce his triumph.

"The people won a great victory," he said in an interview today. "The Governor tried to take tremendous power, but the Lieutenant Governor has been restored to an office that does wield the people's gavel and protects the state."

His chief antagonist in the Senate, Lowell Ray Barron, the President pro tem, said Mr. Windom was wrong to call the compromise a pe

A factional split, and a platoon of screaming Democrats.

sonal victory, agreeing only that the people would benefit from an end to the stalemate.

"For him to fly around the state declaring a victory is about as embarrassing as what he did behind the podium in the jug," Mr. Barron said. "This is only a victory in that the people's business can now be done."

Under the compromise, Mr. Windom will not be able to bottle up legislation or approve any more voice votes, but his faction will retain some power over budget bills and some authority over committee assignments. He said he would *not* block the Governor's principal legislative goal — a state lottery with proceeds designated for education — even though he opposed it. The lottery will go before the voters if it is approved, as expected.

Dr. William H. Stewart, chairman of the political science department at the University of Alabama, said the episode showed that Democrats must take more seriously the growing power of Republicans in Alabama. But Mr. Stewart said it also demonstrated that the Legislature had a great deal of work to do to rise above a dysfunctional level.

"The Legislature still has such a limited agenda, and such a limited conception of what the basic policy-forming institution of the state should be about," Mr. Stewart said. "They're still not identifying the state's real problems, or coming up with solutions. They're still responding to interest-group pressures. But at least now, they'll be able to function, for a while."