

## **'Ordinary citizen' was also a fine leader and model**

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Oral Freeman was a model for the citizen-legislator. He was thoughtful and plain-spoken, consistent in his beliefs but willing to listen to other people's views. He held a number of public offices -- city councilman, mayor, state legislator -- but was never a full-time politician. He liked nothing better, he told me, than to put on his overalls and work in his Ketchikan outboard motor shop.

According to his hometown newspaper, the Ketchikan Daily News, he was at the shop Saturday morning, the day he died of heart failure at age 85.

I worked with and for Freeman in the state House in the late 1970s, early 1980s. He was in his second legislative career, having been in the initial state Legislature in 1959.

"When I first went into state government," he once told the Anchorage Times, "we had less than \$40 million to spend."

Legislators were among the underfunded in those days. Their financial situation left them prey to lobbyists, who tossed bankrolls through their hotel room transoms for "expenses," Freeman said. That helped persuade him to vote for a legislative pay raise, which in turn got him and a bunch of other legislators defeated at the next election.

Freeman was re-elected in 1972. By the time I met him, oil money was pouring into the state and Freeman was one of the few politicians to question the wisdom of spending it as fast as it came in, though he understood the incentive.

"It's in the nature of politicians to use the people's money to buy the people's votes," he said. "That's as natural to a politician as breathing."

This is just one of the ideas about government and politics I learned from Freeman and took for my own. He never strayed far from his small-town, working-class roots. They made him a life-long Democrat and interested in helping working people get by. He sponsored a homesteading bill, he said, because "young Alaskans in my district can't find a piece of land to build themselves a home."

But his beliefs also made him skeptical of big government and big spending. Freeman was an early advocate of the Alaska Permanent Fund and the dividend program. He was the prime mover behind a successful attempt to add almost \$3

billion to the fund. He proposed a system to lower state income taxes because that would help working people and because the state, at the time, had more than enough oil money.

"It seems to me that the only moral justification for collecting taxes is that the government needs the money in order to be able to provide the services," he said in 1977. "When the government has sufficient monies to provide the services without the taxation, then that moral justification disappears."

Freeman could say serious things, but he had the virtue of never taking himself too seriously. He was a colorful speaker, much given to well-polished aphorisms. After Pappy Moss, a legislator who had spent more than his share of time around the cracker barrel, made his maiden speech on the House floor, Freeman turned to the reporters sitting behind him and said, "Oh-oh, another corncob philosopher."

Freeman had his share of setbacks in politics, but he had an abiding faith in the political system, in the value of compromise and in the ability of people to govern themselves. I learned some of that from him, too.

There are many flowery phrases I could write, and mean, about Oral Freeman, but I think I will let him write his own epitaph.

"I don't claim to be a genius," he once said. "I'm just an ordinary citizen with decent human instincts."

Amen, Oral, and Godspeed.