

Who's the boss?

Some say state House speaker's leadership being undermined

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They thought they had a deal.

Gov. John Bel Edwards, Senate President John Alario and House Speaker Taylor Barras had just met on Feb. 19 in the governor's fourth-floor office in the State Capitol, three days before the end of a special session called to resolve a short-term budget deficit. The three men had agreed on how to resolve the key sticking point: The Legislature would use \$99 million from its rainy day fund to plug the budget hole.

At least that's what Edwards and Alario believed. Instead, they heard Barras say publicly the next day that he, the Senate president and the governor didn't yet have an agreement.

Alario and Edwards were furious, believing Barras had walked away from the agreed upon \$99 million figure after getting opposition from two powerful lawmakers: Rep. Lance Harris, of Alexandria, who chairs the House Republican caucus, and Rep. Cameron Henry, who chairs the budget writing committee. The two men favored taking millions less from the fund.

Alario and Edwards were so angry that they passed word that they would not back down from the \$99 million, even if that meant blowing up the special session. In the end, they got their way: On the session's final day, Barras publicly endorsed their number after two tick sheets - one by a Republican, the other by a Democrat - showed that the House rank and file sided with Edwards and Alario. The Legislature finally approved the measure, and lawmakers went home.

But the episode, and others like it, give rise to one of the main storylines for the 60-day regular legislative session that begins Monday: Who, exactly, is in charge of the Louisiana House?

It's not an idle question. The decisions made by the House - and indeed the entire Legislature - affect every Louisiana resident and business. Over the next two months, legislators will pass a budget that spends nearly \$10 billion of taxpayer money, and they will pass dozens of laws affecting taxes, the environment, crime, education and other matters.

Barras is facing a major challenge this year: how to win enough votes for a plan to head off a huge budget hole when \$1.3 billion in temporary taxes will expire next year.

On paper, it's clear who's in charge of the House: Barras, who was a little-known legislator from New Iberia until he emerged as a compromise choice to become speaker 15 months ago. Elected by his fellow Republicans, who hold a majority of the House, Barras runs the show every day.

But interviews with more than a dozen political insiders - administration officials, senators, House members and others who closely follow the legislative process - show that Barras' hold over the 105-member House is unusually tenuous, thanks to a range of factors: political polarization, the atypical way in which he got the job and his gentlemanly personality.

As a result, Harris and Henry frequently undercut him in ways that would have been unthinkable in the regimes of previous speakers. It causes great frustration for Edwards and for Republicans willing to work with the Democratic governor. "He won't move until he gets approval from the 'shadow government,'" said a senior Edwards administration official who, like others, asked not to be named to avoid upsetting Barras. "It's never been like this. It's hard to reach a consensus and get things done. Usually a speaker or president is able to deliver their votes. They get what they want. You have to have a leader who tells people what to do. You have to assert your leadership. But he can't make the decision until someone gives him the green light."

One factor behind Barras' weak hand, everyone agrees, is the rise of political partisanship in Louisiana, which seems to be a nationwide trend. With it has come the rise of polarized "no" caucuses on the left and especially on the right that oppose new government initiatives.

In Washington, the far-right House Freedom Caucus recently killed President Donald Trump's effort to undo President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act, popularly known as "Obamacare," with its insistence on not settling for anything less than totally repealing the measure.

In Louisiana, up to 25 anti-tax and anti-spending conservatives in the House consistently vote no on tax and budget measures, rarely proposing their own solutions. The "no" caucus handcuffs Barras'

efforts to cobble together enough votes - particularly on tax measures, which require at least 70 votes.

"You have people coming in with hard philosophical views who won't move off of them," Alario, R-Westwego, said in an interview. "It's not good for democracy. You need give and take. If everyone digs in, nothing happens."

At times, Harris has led the "no" caucus against the governor. A second-term lawmaker from Alexandria who owns convenience stores, a farm and other commercial property, Harris, 55, has told associates privately that he is interested in running for governor. He did not respond to four requests from The Advocate for an interview.

State Rep. Sam Jones, D-Franklin, who frequently butts heads with Harris, said he has come to recognize Harris' influence.

"When you have to piece together something, he's the one who gets it done," Jones said.

Henry, 42, a business consultant and third-term legislator from Metairie, appears to lead the anti-tax and anti-spending crowd. He represents one of the most conservative districts in Louisiana, a district that has minimal need for government assistance, and he is angling to run for a conservative state Senate seat from Metairie in 2019. He did not respond to five requests for an interview.

Henry made a strong bid to be elected speaker, traveling the state during the 2015 election season to garner support from his colleagues. But on the night before the newly seated House would make the selection in January 2016, senior Republicans concluded that Henry didn't have the necessary 53 votes because not enough moderate Republicans would support him.

Edwards, meanwhile, was pushing state Rep. Walt Leger III, D-New Orleans, and believed Leger had the votes thanks to Republican support. Governors had traditionally chosen or blessed the House's choice as speaker.

But senior Republicans wanted to elect one of their own. So, working with a group of freshmen voting as a bloc, they settled on Barras, someone whom everyone liked because of his easygoing, low-key manner. Henry stepped aside, and Barras defeated Leger 56-49.

Barras took the job with several handicaps.

Although he managed Iberia Bank's operations in Iberia Parish, Barras had never been a leader in the House. He hadn't even chaired a committee. And he hadn't had the opportunity to line up his own legislative team - and get their commitment to vote with him on tough measures - as previous speakers had done.

"The way he got the job was by default," said a former senior Republican lawmaker. "I almost feel sorry for Taylor. Everybody likes him. But he's drinking water out of a fire hose. He's trying to do the best thing he can. There are too many chiefs. Nobody knows who is in charge."

In some ways, the speaker has the powers of a head football coach, who chooses his players and calls the plays. The speaker decides who chairs each committee, who sits on each committee and which bills will be heard each day. But unlike a football coach, he does not have absolute control over his team. Members can defy him and go their own way. Past speakers, however, have enforced discipline by bouncing several renegade members from choice committee assignments. Barras has yet to do that.

He had a rocky first year. He had to lead the House in a special session only a month after becoming speaker. Edwards became so frustrated working with Barras - thinking that he had deals with the speaker, only to learn that he didn't - that the governor vented publicly.

"It's always been the case in the past that if you have an agreement with the speaker, you know what that gets you," Edwards told reporters late in the session. "That has not proven to be the case thus far. I know the speaker is working with me in good faith. He is obviously facing some difficulties in the House in getting people to stand with him."

That special session nearly collapsed when two revenue raising bills needed to plug a \$1 billion-plus budget deficit got tied up in the House. They didn't pass until a final frantic 15 minutes. Alario was so frustrated at the near miss that he teared up and told colleagues that he would talk to Barras about how to do better. (Alario was twice speaker of the House under Gov. Edwin Edwards.) To be sure, Barras, who did not respond to two requests for an interview, has his defenders. "The House is an unruly place," said state Rep. Jay Morris, R-Monroe. "He doesn't have the luxury of using the Governor's Office to threaten people as a way to give or take away things, as the Senate does because of Sen. Alario's relationship with the governor. I think he's been an effective speaker. He's been able to synthesize a

lot of disparate views. At the end of the day, he's accomplished things - just not like everybody wants."

Under Barras' tenure, the House has cheered conservatives by rejecting numerous tax increases sought by the governor to end the state's chronic budget deficits. The governor has complained that House leaders haven't given him alternatives to pay for vital government services that Republicans also want.

Moderate Republicans in the House also chafed under Barras' leadership last year and again during the just-completed special session when he wouldn't publicly commit to the \$99 million rainy day fund, the final piece needed to close the short-term budget gap and end the session.

"I think the speaker is scared of Cameron and the far right wing," one Republican moderate said recently. "Taylor has to herd cats. It's not an easy job."

Barras also faced the governor's wrath on the day before the session ended when he still hadn't said publicly what he had told the governor and Alario privately: that he supported the \$99 million.

"You're the speaker of the House. It's time to lead this effort," the governor told Barras, according to two people familiar with what he said.

The following afternoon, after the tick sheets showed at least two-thirds of the House favored the measure, Barras put it to a vote. He said he could support it because the governor had agreed to a proposal sought by the speaker that called for the Legislature to consider implementing a 3 percent across-the-board spending cut to numerous funds starting July 1.

The bill passed with 92 votes. Like Barras, Henry and Harris voted for it.