

Few reforms accomplished by Legislature

By KARIN DAVIES

The Associated Press

JUNEAU — Many legislators rolled into the capital city in January pledging to reform the legislature.

But when they went home nearly six months later, few reforms had been approved, and throughout the record-long session, House lawmakers bickered continuously over abuses of minority rights by the leadership.

Lawmakers' pledges in January to reform the legislature came in response to complaints from constituents, following the 1980 session, that while cloistered in the capitol lawmakers abused their powers, shoved pork into the state budget and violated the public trust.

Voters and newspapers called for major changes in the way the legislature conducts its business, and some lawmakers responded.

The new Senate leadership pledged to reform the chamber and bring decision-making into the open. A short time later, House Democrats unveiled a major package of legislative reform proposals.

Rep. Fred Brown, D-Fairbanks, said the proposals were forged because "a lot of us were concerned about the public and the press painting with a broad brush just because of the actions of one or two legislators."

Senate Rules Chairman Tim Kelly, R-Anchorage, said that in addition to the public outcry "anyone who's been around

there for a while realized that changes were necessary ... With a lack of direction and a lack of rules there is no reason" that lawmakers couldn't take advantage of the flexible rules again.

Rep. Dick Randolph, L-Fairbanks, blasted lawmakers for staging a "dog-and-pony show" touting the need for legislative reform, and not following through.

None of the House-proposed measures became law this session, and the most significant changes made to the rules governing legislative procedures won't take effect until the 1983 session — at which time lawmakers may decide to make changes.

Rep. Tony Vaska, D-Bethel, called the reforms "a joke. The people who yelled the loudest are responsible for the biggest abuses now."

He was referring to complaints from Republicans and Libertarians who early in the session blasted the Democratic leadership for running roughshod over the minority.

But when a GOP-dominated coalition ousted the Democratic leadership two weeks before the session ended, members of the coalition subjected the new minority to nearly the same treatment the Republicans and Libertarians had complained about earlier.

Despite pledges for more openness in the legislature, a few key lawmakers and top aides to Gov. Jay Hammond put together in private a \$765 million capital

budget. After some legislators grumbled about the closed-door process, House leaders said keeping the public works budget under wraps may have been a mistake.

But Senate President Jalmor Kerttula, D-Palmer, argued that he ran one of the most open Senates ever.

"We had a public consensus, not a caucus," he said.

Some senators disagreed, however, pointing out they routinely met in the legislative lounge before floor sessions to discuss bills slated for floor action. Debate and split votes were rare in the Senate.

Kelly said he is "pretty much satisfied with the reforms. We handled the two biggest abuses — bill stripping and free conference committees. But I don't think we got into the post-Watergate syndrome and paralyzed the legislature so much that it can't work."

Senators did some arm-twisting to shove through the House a measure aimed at limiting the abuses of free conference committees, which are House-Senate negotiating teams appointed to work out compromises on legislation.

Presently, the six-member panels can rewrite a bill completely, adding or deleting material at will.

The rule change would limit free conference committees to appropriations passed by either the House or Senate. However, the panels still could add money to the budget needed to cover new legislation approved during the session.

But the rule changes does not take effect until the 1983 session, at which time lawmakers could reject the change, prompting Rep. Terry Martin, R-Anchorage, to complain that "if we're going to do reform, we should start with ourselves."

Lawmakers also agreed to halt the practice of bill stripping — when one house guts a bill and replaces it with almost totally new matter.

But Brown said the rule change has loopholes "big enough to drive a truck through."

Three House-passed reform bills were lodged in Senate committees when senators called it quits for the session.

The bills would make mandatory certain record-keeping procedures for legislative committees set up legislative contracting requirements, and broaden the financial information public officials must disclose.

Another bill stalled in the House by extensive committee work would set standards of conduct for public officials, including lawmakers, the governor and lieutenant governor, and appointed officers and employees of state agencies and municipalities.