On Background Podcast – Episode 1 – Tennessee House Speaker Beth Harwell (R-Nashville)

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An Excerpt from when Civic-Point's Tom Lee met with Speaker Beth Harwell

The House chamber in Tennessee's state capitol is not quite the same room as when it opened in 1859.

The spittoons and cane-backed chairs are gone, replaced by oaken desks and leather seats. Lobbyists have to stay outside. And no one has used tobacco, at least the smoking kind, on the House floor for a long time.

And then, there's the electronic vote board.

High on the chamber walls, the board is an innovation of the 1970s. It shows every member's vote as soon as it's cast—green light for yes, red for no. There are hundreds of the votes every year, year after year, and on all of them, the Speaker calls for the vote in the same way, in the same cadence…

Beth Halteman Harwell owes her speakership to many things, but one of them is surely that cadence. Because, on May 22, 2002, Speaker Jimmy Naifeh called it differently. Trying that day to pass Tennessee's first income tax, Naifeh called for the vote…and when a few more red lights than green appeared on the board, Naifeh kept the board open for two more hours.

Republicans, most of whom opposed the tax, were furious. Though they eventually won the battle, for a decade they kept fighting the war…about that vote…and that vote board…until 2010, when they unseated 14 Democrats…brushing the balance of power in Tennessee a deep shade of red.

Then, a new Speaker ascended the House dais, one of the few things *un*changed in the room from 1859. And while there had been other, though not many, *Republican* speakers…not one of them had ever

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been called…*Madam* Speaker.

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