

# STATE HOUSE

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## NEWS SERVICE

### SOME HOUSE MEMBERS DISGRUNTLED BY CHATTER-FILLED SESSIONS

By Colleen Quinn  
STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, JAN. 26, 2012....Rep. Denise Andrews, a freshman representative from Orange, scolded her House colleagues earlier this week during debate on an education collaborative reform bill, suggesting they had showed a lack of respect to each other during floor deliberations.

Since then, the comments have both stirred praise and raised eyebrows among House members.

In an unusual move, Andrews took to the podium during the formal session Tuesday to complain about her colleagues' chatter and cell phone usage during debate.

"We wonder in today's society why in the classroom teachers are not listened to. Yet, we sit here on Beacon Hill and do not listen to each other," Andrews said.

"People expect more of leadership. I am one of those leaders, I expect more of myself and I invite you to do the same," she went on to say.

Several members interviewed by the News Service said later they were in the chamber Tuesday but unable to hear her comments. They said they learned about her remarks after the session.

Speaker Pro-Tempore Patricia Haddad (D-Somerset), who presided over the session, was forced to stop several times when the din of members' side conversations made it impossible to hear debate. That's a regular occurrence in the House, as well as the Senate, but some members believe changes are needed.

Several freshmen lawmakers said they are very concerned about the noise problem, and have gone to House leadership asking them to do something. Some veteran House members said they think the boisterous banter has gotten worse recently, partly because there are fewer formal sessions.

Others said the fact that most amendments are filed and discussed prior to debate lends itself to members paying less attention. One House member, who did not want to be identified, said the practice of agreeing to details of bills and amendments prior to sessions makes it less vital to pay attention to every word people are saying during sessions because there is usually no chance of “missing something.”

During her short, somewhat disjointed speech, Andrews said she was appalled by the revelations of mismanagement and financial malfeasance that allegedly took place at the Merrimack Valley Special Education Collaborative, and went on to say she questions whether lawmakers are able to do what state residents need them to do when they cannot even listen to each other.

“I, frankly, am appalled and daily question whether I should continue to serve in this House. Why? Because I wonder whether we’re willing to do what the citizens need us to do in today’s times,” she said from the House floor. “So I will continue to ponder that question as I go forward with my family. And I ask you to ponder it, to ask us, are we doing enough and our best work to serve the citizens of the commonwealth? If not, don’t ask to have this privilege. If you do, then when we are here, let’s be about business.”

After the session, Andrews said she was disappointed in the behavior, and had hoped for more from lawmakers.

“I come from a background, in my family, where you show respect for people. We’re not perfect, but you really try until you get your job done. Here we are doing the people’s business, doing a piece of legislation where we are not being respectful,” she told the News Service.

“I thought this is not right. I need to say something,” Andrews said. “We have created a culture that is distracted because we are plugged in all the time. But a society will never work if we don’t have time to listen. A society will never work if we don’t show manners and have respect.”

Some of her freshmen colleagues in the House applauded her for having

the courage to speak her mind about the lack of respect shown in the House during debate.

Several members of the Republican caucus applauded when Andrews concluded her remarks. One of them, Rep. Sheila Harrington, said she offered a standing ovation.

“She gave an incredible speech, and still people were not listening to her,” Harrington said.

Harrington, an attorney, said that when she started in the House she was astounded by the constant conversations that go on while someone is speaking at the podium. In courtrooms, judges do not allow attorneys to carry on conversations in the hallway if they can be heard in court, she said.

Harrington, a Groton Republican, said she and other freshmen have complained to House leadership about the noise level during debate, and asked Rep. Bryon Rushing, the majority whip, to do something about it.

“He said for us to get up every single time it is bothering you,” she said, referring to the practice of a member rising, and being recognized by the chair during debate, to say they are having trouble hearing.

In the few days following her terse comments, several House members said the noise level in the chamber has become a real problem. Rep. Sarah Peake (D-Provincetown) said she often leaves the chamber during formal sessions to watch debate on television because it is impossible to hear in the chamber.

“I can hear the debate from my office better. The acoustics are so difficult in there,” Peake said. “I understand her frustration.”

Rep. Carolyn Dykema (D-Holliston) said she heard about the sentiments expressed by Andrews on the floor, but couldn’t actually hear what she was saying.

Dykema, who admitted she was one of the guilty parties talking to her neighbors, said she thinks the conversations among members are not meant to be disrespectful, but stem from the “social nature” of the job, where building relationships are so important to getting legislation through.

The House and Senate in recent years have held formal sessions roughly

once a week, if that.

Dykema said the sessions provide an opportunity for members to see each other and talk about bills.

Rep. Steven Levy (D-Marlborough) said many members talk frequently about the chatter during sessions.

“There should be some decorum and respect,” he said. “It is frustrating when the speaker gavels the body down and literally within five seconds the uproar comes back. It is a body that should respect the process.”

Members have considered filing a resolution to address the problem, but have not finalized any ideas, Levy said.

“This is a body that is making laws. At the very least, we should extend the courtesy of sitting quietly and listening to each other,” Levy said.

A DeLeo spokesman declined to comment.

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