



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

AN INITIATIVE OF
THE WOODROW WILSON SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
AND THE BOBST CENTER FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

Series: Governance Traps

Interview no.: E 4

Interviewee: Senator Sumo Kupee

Interviewer: Graeme Blair

Date of Interview: 24 July 2009

Location: Monrovia, Liberia

BLAIR: This is Graeme Blair, I'm here from Innovations for Successful Societies, and I am here with Senator (Sumo) Kupee who is the Chair of the Senate Ways and Means Finance and Budget Committee.

KUPEE: *That is correct.*

BLAIR: Just to confirm for the tape that you have consented for the interview.

KUPEE: *Yes, I have.*

BLAIR: Before we begin, maybe you can speak briefly about your background; how you got started in politics and the steps that brought you into the leadership in the Senate.

KUPEE: *Thank you very much. Actually, when I returned from graduate school, I went to the University of Liberia where I taught from 1986 until 1997. For six years, I chaired the Department of Economics at the university and I was called upon in 2005 by citizens of my county to participate in the general and presidential elections. They petitioned me, and I thought they were serious so I thought to participate. And that's how I became elected as senior senator of my county. My county is the largest county in this country; it is Lofa County. It has also been the breadbasket, so to speak, and the agricultural base county. So they thought that they needed somebody who would come and speak and represent them in the legislature, and this is how I thought to try my chances. And here I am, serving as the senior senator of the country.*

BLAIR: How did you get into the leadership of the Senate to become the chair of this important committee?

KUPEE: *Well, actually, a lot of senators in the Senate know me from the university. Nine of the tighter senators are former students of mine. So when the occasion came to elect chairperson of the Committee on Budget and Finance, they, knowing my background—I was overwhelmingly elected on white ballot to chair that committee.*

BLAIR: Maybe we can begin by speaking about what you think are the key successes in your term as the chair of the committee—government reforms and rebuilding processes—the successes, and perhaps, the projects that were challenging to get through and to work on with the government.

KUPEE: *The Ways, Means, Finance and Budget Committee is the only committee that is spelled out in the Constitution. That's the only constitutional or statutory committee, if you like. According to our Constitution, this committee is supposed to be represented by all counties. We have fifteen counties in Liberia; I have a membership of fifteen, which means that every county is represented on that committee.*

One of the major responsibilities of the legislature is oversight. We oversee the function of the executive. One of the ways to oversee the function of the executive is to scrupulously monitor the budget. So this committee's responsibility is to ensure that every county has a say in the approval and the implementation of the national budget. So far, that has been quite successful.

In the history of this country, the executive was the formulator and the implementer of the budget. There was never a time, until this government, where the legislature ever debated a budget. I can say that one of the successes of this committee, one of the successes of this government, is that there is now a procedure where the national budget is debated. It is not only debated but transformed. I remember in this year's budget, a total of 347 million dollars was submitted to the legislature. By the time the public hearing process and the approval process concluded, we ended with a budget of 371 million, meaning an additional 24 million dollars was discovered by the legislature. This has never happened in the history of our country.

So I can say that, in a way, we are beginning to take our work seriously because the Constitution provides that there can be no appropriation outside of the budget without approval by the legislature. We are the holders of the purse. I can say that with this committee, the legislature has now begun to actually enforce its oversight responsibility of the activities of the executive branch of the government. In the past, there has been too much super-executive. Now we are beginning now to say, hey, yes, we hold the purse and you implement the purse based on what we agree to. I think this is far an advanced step that we are taking in the overall financial management process.

The second most important thing that this committee is also trying to do—in this country, there has never been any financial management law; there has been an absolute absence of public financial management law. We now have before us a draft public financial management act that is going to integrate the activities of all players in the public financial management forum. I think that this is an advantage in the poverty reduction strategy program, because you need to have people accountable. You need for every player in public financial management to be very clear on their terms of reference, who does what and who doesn't. So I think, again, this committee is responsible for ensuring that we pass this public financial management law and hold the executive responsible for fully implementing it.

A third thing that this committee is also engaged in is that we have a very bad, so to speak, an investment incentive code. Coming out of war, fourteen years of war when everything is destroyed, you need to create an investment environment that encourages investors. This committee is also reviewing a new investment incentive code with the hope of attracting investment into the country, by which we can create jobs, put income in our people's pockets. This is the only way we can deal with this whole issue of poverty reduction because poverty reduction is about people's improvement. You can't reduce poverty when people have no jobs and we think that by passing these pieces of legislation, this committee will be happy in the overall reconstruction of the country and in improving the economy.

You know that one of the pillars for this poverty reduction strategy is economic revitalization. We think that this committee, as the constitution committee for finance and budget, will help in this process if we have to approve the three most important legislations. I'm referring to the Public Financial Management Act, which is helping the budget, and the new revenue code. This is where we are, so far.

In summary, I can say yes, we have now begun to realize that oversight of the budget is the key function for our work, the key portion of our work, and the way

to do that is to institute those appropriate legislation that will help the executive in doing its work.

BLAIR: Maybe we could start going through each of those and talking about them in detail. Maybe we can start first with the Public Financial Management Law, which I know that you have been working on a lot, and then move to the more general budgeting process.

KUPEE: *Okay.*

BLAIR: What has been the process, for the Public Financial Management Law, of bringing the various constituencies, the various ministries that are involved and the key decision makers in the executive mansion and in the legislature, together? Tell me about that, the negotiating process.

KUPEE: *All right. The way our budget process is is that the budget is formulated by the executive and sent to the legislature. Once it is approved, it goes back to the various ministries and agencies of government. The ministries and agencies of government then go through the expenditure line. What has been lacking is that there hasn't been a very clear role of what the central bank of Liberia does as the monetary agency of government, what the Minister of Finance does as the fiscal agent of government. And there hasn't been a clear definition of the role of the office of the auditor general. What this Financial Management Act does is that it not only defines the roles of those three key institutions, but it creates a link between them.*

As the legislature approves the budget, the Minister of Finance implements the budget. The auditor general audits the spending institutions and reports to the legislature. So by this, we are overseeing the budget through the eyes of the auditor general. This has never been the case. Before then, the auditor-general was reporting to the executive mansion. You try to understand that the man who is implementing the budget is the same person who is overseeing, and the same person to whom reports are made. We have to change that law.

The new auditor-general now reports to the legislature. What that does is it helps us in the overseeing of the national budget. This is basically what the Financial Management Law does. It defines the function of these three key institutions and links them in a way as to who reports to whom and at what time. I think this is what the law is all about. It is not that there are separate laws. There are laws, but they are disjointed. It makes it very difficult to have an effective public financial management. What the new law does is that it brings everybody together, defines each person's role, and it has a relationship. This is the advantage this law has.

BLAIR: When the law was being crafted, there were many interests at stake. The Finance Ministry had interests in maintaining its own oversight over the process. The auditor-general I'm sure had certain interests in how his role would be played out. The executive mansion I'm sure wanted it to be played out. How were those competing interests—?

KUPEE: *I'll tell you what. I will speak to the interests of the legislature because the interest of the legislature is clearly defined in terms of the administration of the budget, is clearly defined in Article 34D of the constitution. What that says is that the legislature shall approve all appropriations, and there will be no spending outside*

of the approval of the legislature. That portion was being diminished by the executive in terms of control. They're interested in seeing a law that says that the government shall control the consolidated fund.

What is the consolidated fund? The consolidated fund is the general account of government where all revenues are deposited. No money gets out of that revenue without the express approval of the legislature. In this new law, there was an attempt to say that this fund was controlled by the government. But when you say by the government, you diminish the role of the legislature. So we said, "No, no, it has to be consistent with the constitution."

This fund would be controlled by the legislature and managed by the executive. Those are two different things. You manage it. Once we approve it—the approval process is a control process. The issue of who gets what and how it is spent is pure management. You can go ahead and do that. That was a sticky issue, and we have agreed now that the legislature controls and the executive implements based on policies that have been agreed upon and approved by the legislature.

BLAIR: What was the process; what was that negotiating like? Who was at the table when you came and said this is how it must be from the constitution?

KUPEE: *The executive is represented by the Minister of Finance. We have an executive budget committee. It is comprised of the Minister of Finance, the Minister of planning, the Civil Service Agency and the rest of it. That is the team that represents the executive.*

Of course on the legislature, the legislature is represented by the joint committees of ways, means, and finance of the two Houses. You know that we have a House of Senate and a House of Representatives. So we were negotiating with them.

BLAIR: It was the two committees and—

KUPEE: *The joint two committees and the executive side of the committee.*

BLAIR: You're all sitting at a table?

KUPEE: Yes.

BLAIR: What was that conversation like?

KUPEE: *I think it was quite friendly, but frank. This is law. You cannot—our constitution provides that any law that abrogates it is null and void. No statute should attempt to diminish the constitution. All we had to do was to quote directly that portion of the constitution that says that the legislature is the holder of the purse and that there can be no appropriation outside of the legislative approval. So, you cannot do any law that would try to diminish that. I think that was quite clear. We passed that. Basically, that was the only hurdle.*

The other area was how is the GAC (General Auditing Commission) funded. That was very key. The law was ambiguous on how the General Auditing Commission is funded. We have ensured that there will be two levels of funding. There will be budgetary allocation for the general funding of the operation of the General Auditing Commission, and each ministry and agency of government will have, in

their own budget, funding for auditing so that when the GAC does the audit, they are paid from that and then the budget will then support the staff and the operation of the GAC.

There are two categories of funding here. The other category is the one that has to do with public operations, state-owned enterprises, or nonprofit enterprises. They've got a board of directors that developed the policies, and the policies are implemented by the management. This is a little different from central government ministers. So the public corporation would also provide in their various budgets that, first of all, they would establish the development budget and that budget would be approved by the Minister of Finance. In that budget, there would be money; there would be lines to support the other of their institutions.

The third issue, which was very key, was that like having external auditors, the GAC is supposed to ensure that all ministries and agencies of government have effective internal auditors. Because every time an external auditor comes it is after the fact; the damage is done, the mismanagement is done and they come to see the fight. If you establish internal audit systems, you can avoid a lot of the wastage before the general auditor comes in and so, the general audit is also going to establish internal audit units in all of the ministries and agencies of government. These auditors will be trained so that by the time—at the end of the fiscal year, what the general auditing commission will be doing will just be summarizing what has already happened and avoiding the wastages in the ministries and agencies of government. That was one of the things that we unanimously agreed to in this Public Financial Management Law, that there would be—.

BLAIR: Unanimously between the legislature and the—.

KUPEE: *Yes, that was agreed upon. We saw that it was good to have external auditors, but external auditors usually come after the fight. If the interest of government is to avoid wastage, then you need to have people who can detect it before it is damaged. That was something we unanimously agreed upon. I think the word was—I'll tell you one other thing that happened. The executives were very smart. In the process of drafting new laws, they worked with the legislature. We sat together. On the issues that we thought were very difficult, we told them that look—by the time the law got to us, we had a lot of agreement in a lot of places, except for one of the places where we wanted to do something. Overall, we already had a pretty good understanding of what we wanted, what they wanted. So, the government passed maybe right after the July 26th celebration.*

BLAIR: The areas of disagreement were the spending, the need for there to be oversight by the legislature, and the GAC issue?

KUPEE: *Yes, those were the key areas. I think we resolved those issues already.*

BLAIR: The GAC disagreement was that the government did not want to spend the money on the GAC auditing in the ministries?

KUPEE: *No, the issue was how you fund the General Auditing Commission. The amount needed to fund the General Auditing Commission was too huge so you had to break it up into two parts. The first part would be that in the national budget, there would be operational funding of the GAC and, in the various ministries and*

agencies, there would be lines that would provide money for the auditing of their ministries and agencies. In that way you don't increase the budget line of the GAC too much because most people see auditing as an unnecessary exercise. You don't want to increase the line.

So by the time people take the budget, they are looking at lines. They look at education, they look at health, they look at the legislature, and you don't want to see a situation where the General Auditing Commission has a budget that is larger than education. I mean, nobody can understand that.

BLAIR: The concern was public support for this?

KUPEE: *Public support for the work of the General Auditing Commission.*

BLAIR: Interesting. So how did you go about convincing government that this was the right thing to do?

KUPEE: *The way it works is they submit the law to us, and we review the law. Once we pass it, it is concurred by the lower, the House of Representatives, and it goes to the mansion. It goes to the President (Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf). Now she needs to read it. If there are substantive changes that we've made that she doesn't like, she can veto the entire law or she can veto a line and give explanation. If she doesn't do that in 21 days, the law is assumed as being passed. So the process is that we're going to send it back to the executive with the amendments that we've made, and we wait to see what's going to happen. But normally, laws are hardly vetoed because of the way we collaborate. We're working with the executive, even on the budget with the back and forth, to make sure that we don't have to—our people don't have the patience to sit looking at law going to the executive, coming back to the legislature and all this. We're hoping that by the time it gets to the executive, it would be approved by the executive with these amendments.*

BLAIR: Right, let's move to talking about the budget process, which is a long process here. What is the involvement between the government and your committee and the committee in the House of Representatives in the budgeting process? Are you involved from the beginning? What is the back and forth?

KUPEE: *No, we're not involved. The budget process takes three phases. The first phase is that the Minister of Finance will request standing agencies to submit a proposal of what they intend to do. The Minister of Finance then summarizes the proposal and develops a draft budget. The draft budget is then done by the Bureau of the Budget, and submitted to the legislature. When a budget is submitted to the legislature, along with performance reports of the past budget, the legislature then holds two hearings.*

The first hearing will be a hearing on revenue. There are key revenue institutions of government, and the Minister of Finance is the key revenue institution. Then you have the Minister of Transport, you've got the Minister of Justice, and a number of revenue-generating agencies. We hold the first public hearing. For instance, if the executive has submitted a budget of 340 million, how much of that is contributed by maritime. We call in the Bureau of Maritime. Your submission in this budget is ten million, for instance, we think you can bring more. Based on our records, based on history, we think you can make more. We go through this

discussion. If it is possible to increase that portion, fine; if it is not, we leave it as it is.

So once we hear the public, do the public hearing on the revenue side, we then go to the expenditure side. We invite all expenditure institutions, ministries and agencies to comment, justify why they're requesting this revenue now. Last year, we gave you ten million, why do you think you want 12 million this year? What did you do last year? Once that process ends, then the budget public hearing process has ended.

The two committees of the House of Representatives then go in house. We then invite the budget, executive budget committee, which is headed by the Minister of Finance. They then come in house. If we have discovered new revenue in the process of the hearing, we then tell the executive budget committee you submitted a budget of X but in the course of the hearing we have discovered that it can be Y. In other words, it can be a little bit more than this.

BLAIR: That's what happened.

KUPEE: *Yes, this is what happened. But, for instance, the 347 million dollars that was submitted, we discovered that there could be additional 24 million dollars mainly coming from customs, coming from maritime and the rest of it. We then invited the Ministry in. This is what we think can happen. Can you confirm these figures? Then the Ministry goes back, meets with these institutions and says look, can we confirm these figures? Once they confirm those figures, the ministry signs, attests that yes, this additional revenue is obtainable. Again, they bring it back to the legislature.*

The legislature then sits down and does a redistribution of the additional revenue to Ministry of Health, Education and the rest of it. Then they submit the budget back to the executive committee. The executive committee takes it to the mansion and once it is confirmed, they bring it back to the legislature. We then approve it and take it back to the mansion, the President signs, and it becomes law.

BLAIR: Those negotiations over where to redistribute this substantial extra expenditure, how do they work? You are with the committee from the House of Representatives.

KUPEE: Yes.

BLAIR: How are those difficult choices made on how to redistribute—?

KUPEE: *They are quite difficult choices. For instance, we realized in the budget this year that there were a lot of shifts from the Minister of Health budget for the last fiscal year. The joint committee of the House of Representatives and the Senate then decided that we were going to put those monies back that were shifted from the Ministry of Health budget. We unanimously agreed to that. We identified how much that we cut. We also asked the executive: do you have any interest in putting money? Do you want to put money, additional money, into security or do you want to put additional money into the diplomatic mission? We assigned that. So again, it is a process of negotiations. The legislature has its own—for instance, of the 24 million, we give three million dollars for county development.*

This money is supposed to go directly to the counties to carry on pet projects. So that is agreed upon.

Again, it is a process of negotiations. The executive comes in, they participate in the redistribution of the additional money. The legislature has its own program, it does the distribution. In the end, both the executive and the legislature agree on a table of distribution, and it is approved by us and sent to the executive. But I can assure you that they are quite difficult choices because our constitution provides that 25% of our annual budget should go to education. But this has never been possible because of the demand. It has never been possible. I think, as a matter of fact, in this last budget, the percentage of education was reduced. So what we had to do, if we were not going to increase it, at least we could put it at the level of last year, and this is what we strived to do this year. So we had to give a good chunk of the additional revenue to education, just to ensure that their budget didn't go below what it was last year.

BLAIR: How do you deal with competing interests in the two committees of the legislature who must have different regional interests in allocating money, different party interests perhaps. The legislature is operating in a minority government. How are those interests balanced?

KUPEE: *It is difficult, and we fight from the beginning to the end. We're still fighting for instance. There are regional interests, individual interests, small individual interests. People belonging to certain—a legislator born in a certain hospital district wants money to go to that hospital. That's how fragmented the interests are. But in the end, we have a disadvantage, which is a blessing and that disadvantage is that the money is never enough. So in the end we just have to agree that, look, let us reduce this individual interest and put the money to institutions, and this is what we normally do. But the interests, you can never—there are instances where legislators will say if you do not put this here then I will not vote for the budget. If the person wants 100,000 dollars in a certain institution that we don't have, can we put 50,000 or 25,000? It is negotiation from beginning to end.*

BLAIR: Right. Are party leaders involved in those discussions or is it just the people on the two committees?

KUPEE: *Just the people on the two committees. Normally when the two committees conclude their work, they take it to the plenaries, because the plenary is the higher decision-making body. Now look, we have discovered 24 million dollars, for instance, of additional revenue. This is what we plan to do. Then the plenary approve, make adjustments, and then they take it back into committee rooms and they go ahead. You cannot do it without the approval of the plenary.*

Of course, you have thirty senators, but only fifteen of them are on the ways and means committee. You have 64 representatives, only 15 of them—so you can imagine that half of the lawmakers are not on the committee. You need to also seek their interest by taking it back to plenary and then capture their interest, bring it back to the committee. That is a complicated situation because you would have made a decision. You take it to plenary. That whole decision is changed, you have to come back and readjust. This is a difficult thing. All because of the lack of resources.

Prior to the war, our last budget for 1989—I think it was 680 million or thereabout. Now you're talking about a budget of 347 million, that's half of what the budget was before the war. We haven't even gotten to the halfway point of the money we need. At the time when we had 680 million, at least they had all of the institutions operating. Now you have a situation where everything is damaged and you have half of what you had before the war. So try to imagine the difficulties in redistribution. There can never be enough.

BLAIR: When you came into office, did you have a plan in mind for your work and the committee's work?

KUPEE: *Yes, and that plan was to try to make the budget county-sensitive. The disadvantage in our budgeting process is that our budget is not program oriented. Therefore, it is difficult for you to catch a ministry and say, we gave you 10 million dollars, what did you do with it, because it does not spell out what they're going to do and where. The responsibility of this committee is to say hey, let us take five major ministries of government: education, health, public works, which is responsible for road construction; justice, which is responsible for security—Let us make sure that the budgets of these ministries are so decentralized that you know what is happening in the counties.*

So the task of this committee is to ensure that we can decentralize the budget and ensure that we can see through the eyes of the budget what is happening in the districts and the counties. This has been very difficult, and this is what we have been trying to do. That is why we established the County Development Fund. That is why with the health budget now, you can look through the budget and know how much money each county has in the area of health. In the past, that was not the case.

Now we're trying to get the Minister of Justice to decentralize his budget so that you can look and see how many police officers have been trained and assigned in the counties. Other than that, you see, all the police officers—we say we trained 3500 police officers, they are all on Broad Street running after taxi drivers. You go in a county, a big county like my county, you have less than 100 police officers, everybody is in Monrovia. So the way to do it is to make sure that—you send the police officer—the challenge of this committee, when I took over, was to make sure that we could decentralize the budget so that the budget was actually applicable and was tangible in the rural part of the county, and not just sitting in Monrovia using the budget money to run generators and the rest of it. That is the challenge. We haven't gotten there yet, but we are beginning to now do this with, not all of the ministries and agencies, but the Ministry of Agriculture.

We don't need the Minister of Agriculture sitting here on the seacoast; he needs to be somewhere making farms, investigating in the Ministry of Agriculture. The Minister of Public Works, the Minister of Health and Social Welfare, Minister of Education, Minister of Justice, those are poverty reductions strategic ministries. You need to have them felt in the counties. This is the challenge that we have; this is what we're trying to do. That was the single-most challenge that I gave this committee. If we can succeed in doing that for the next two years, it means we've done a lot.

BLAIR: I've heard several people talk about decentralization in the last couple of weeks. What are some of the challenges that are holding it back? This is obviously

something that many people want, but it hasn't been possible to get there yet. What are some of the things holding it back?

KUPEE: *In my mind, I might be wrong, but I think one of the difficulties in decentralizing is having people to first of all understand the concept of decentralization. When you have, for a hundred plus years, a government that is overly centralized and a government that is almost a one-branch government, I mean, it was a three-branch government, it becomes difficult for people to really understand and have confidence in decentralization. They think you are bluffing—that's the first issue. The second issue is the lack of infrastructure.*

How can you decentralize when 80% of the country is locked us? How do you take education to the people when you can't get to the people? So the difficult thing first of all is—and that's why I need five ministries that we need to concentrate on. The Ministry of Public Works, which is responsible for opening up the road, has to take the lead in the decentralization process because if you read our content development agenda, the first and most important priority that our people go for, if you went to the villages, they would tell you we want roads. You ask them what their next priority is, they will tell you roads. If you asked them ten times, they would tell you roads ten times. So unless there is infrastructure, it becomes difficult to decentralize. That's why, first of all, we need to make sure that we have the institutional infrastructure, but basically, the physical infrastructure for decentralization. Otherwise, it will remain a theory.

I go to my hometown, I go to my county seat, I want to decentralize, I want information to disseminate. But how can I do it? First of all, you don't have electricity, so if you want to communicate, you're not going to get to the people. So for me, infrastructure is the lead for decentralization. The lack of infrastructure you cannot decentralize, you can just talk about it, you just block about it. That's why we need to put into motion those activities that will sustain the process of developing the adequate infrastructure as a means of decentralizing.

You can talk about budget decentralization, but if you've got medicine for a little clinic in a village, how do you get the medicine there? You want to decentralize health care, but how do you get it there? So I think that is the most important difficulty in decentralization.

BLAIR: Are there political barriers?

KUPEE: *Political barriers? Everybody seems to agree that we should decentralize and—perhaps, the only political barrier will be, again, if there is a lack of understanding. For instance, this government, for three years, has not succeeded in holding chieftaincy elections. That is, elections where you would be electing your paramount chief, you general tribe chief and your clan chiefs. How do you decentralize when the minimal activity is to have local officials elected? You haven't succeeded in doing that. So that is a political obstacle.*

Of course everybody is—the argument is no roads, no money. Unless you can have these very simple but important issues handled, it becomes difficult to decentralize. I mean, under the administration of President (Charles) Taylor, the former President Taylor, there were no chieftaincy elections. So for the last fifteen, twenty years, there have been no chieftaincy elections. How do you decentralize? Most of the villages and towns are administered by former fighters.

Those very fighters who were assigned by warring factions, most of them stayed in the town as the tribe chiefs in these villages and towns.

BLAIR: Do you think there is some reticence on the part of the central government to decentralize because some of those people are former combatants? They're people that, perhaps, they don't trust to decentralize power to; do you think that is a problem?

KUPEE: *That is part of the problem, but I think the major problem is the lack of resources to decentralize. I mean, the Elections Commission is telling us that holding the next presidential election is going to cost 9 million dollars minimum. You've got a country that has a budget of 347 million, and you want 9 million dollars to hold elections? That's absurd. So again, I don't know, it's a catch 22, no?*

BLAIR: Maybe in the time that we have remaining we can speak about how you built up your own staff in the beginning. One of the challenges a lot of people in Liberia talk about is how to muster the talents that they need to get the job done. How did you go about recruiting your staff and building up your committee staff?

KUPEE: *There are two categories of staff in the legislature. We have the general staff; they are like civil servants. We came, we met them there, they're going to be there after we are gone. We have personal staffs, and most of the people on our personal staff are people who we came with. I had this person, you gave me the campaign, in the bushes, in the swamps, so you bring them with you. The consideration for bringing those kind of staff is more political. So you get in your office and you're stuck.*

So if you, as a person of the staff assigned in the senator's office or in the legislator's offices, had staffs that were not professional staffs, to get the work done you would be bogged down doing the work yourself, which is why we don't have quality time. If I talk about my own staff—just now, I'm trying to change my staff. The good thing that happened to me during the campaign was that, because I came from the university, all of my campaign people were people who came from the university with me. So when I won, some of them would stay in school, but at least I had a good beginning. Most of them have graduated with BS (Bachelors) in Economics, in Accounting, and therefore, they can help me do my work. But in many offices, in many instances, the staff are more political and so, you have the senator stuck with the kind of work they need to do.

We are asking now to develop these staff. Now that we're stuck with them, train them. Just train them in various areas because you don't want to throw them out. While you're training your personal staff, then try to train the general staff. So our capacity now is low in terms of staff—that's why we're emphasizing training, on-the-job training, for our staff.

BLAIR: What is the plan for that?

KUPEE: *There is a plan for that. I'm a member of the Legislative Modernization Committee, and this committee has developed a comprehensive modernization plan for the next five years. And the key to that plan is personnel training. We are about to establish a legislative budget office. The responsibility of that office will be to help the legislature oversee the nation through the budget. We also will be training our staff and bringing in experts, professionals, who can manage that*

office. That will help to reduce the burden that the legislature now has. But the budget is a big volume.

I mean, try to imagine people who come with no background in economics or public financial management. You put it before them. They don't have the time. So you need an office, you need a group of people that will summarize such a thing, put it on the desk of the legislator, he reads it and then he can go with it. I'm hoping that, before next year, this legislative budget office will be established. We have collaboration from the UNDP (United Nations Development Program), from the EU (European Union) to establish it. That's one of the tasks that my office is undertaking: to establish this legislative budget office.

BLAIR: Who is doing that technical work now?

KUPEE: *We are collaborating with the UNDP. We have established a legislative modernization committee. This committee is chaired by Senator Blamoh Nelson of Grand Kru County. That is the committee that is doing this work. It will be a good thing. I don't know how long you're here, but it would be a good thing for you to talk to Senator Nelson.*

BLAIR: Unfortunately, I'm leaving tomorrow, but we will be coming back, I'm sure. When you're thinking about building the legislative budget office, what are the steps that are being taken to build that up and to recruit the people that will be needed to do the technical work?

KUPEE: *Because we want people who will be manning that office to be professional people, we are working with the civil service agency to help us develop a terms of reference of that office, to help us determine the quality of people that we need for that office. It is not going to be one of those instances where senators are going to assign people into those offices. We are going to publish the positions, and it will be competitive. People will apply; they will be vetted so that we get the best. Because if we don't do that, you're going to have senators again assigning people and you'll end up with the same character and quality of people, and we won't be able to have the work done. So it's going to be competitive and we're going to use the civil service agency to help us in the recruitment process.*

BLAIR: Who will be in charge of making the final decisions on the recruitment? Will there be a civil servant in charge?

KUPEE: *No, the leadership of the two houses will be fully in charge. But we will have the civil service agency help us in the recruitment process, in the vetting, the recruitment of quality people. Because even the UNDP and the EU are trying to give us some help; it's making conditions that—it shouldn't be a situation again where you have political appointments. Let there be people at a technical level that will help us.*

BLAIR: How will it be funded? Is this a new line in the budget?

KUPEE: *Yes, it is a new line in the budget. It is going to be co-funded by the EU, but we will provide some funding.*

BLAIR: Did you have to negotiate that with the executive or were they—?

KUPEE: *No, we didn't have to. We just put it in our budget as a legislative budget line and then sought assistance.*

BLAIR: Makes sense. As you came in, did you struggle to ensure that your team members, the people in your office, were working hard towards your goals, your strategic plan for the committee and for your office? Did you employ any special incentives to ensure that they were working toward your plan?

KUPEE: *Yes. As a matter of fact, I had to change the staff around to make sure that—because initially, I was chairing the Committee on Banking and Currency. That was prior to me taking over the Ways and Means Committee. Now that I am chairman on the Ways and Means Committee, four of my senior staff in my office are in the area of economics and accounting, and I think that this is the only way that I can be helped for years. I'm also providing some small incentives to get them committed to what I do because I can't do it all by myself. My chief of office staff has a public financial management background. The administrative assistant has a BSE in economics. So I think I'm improving the quality of my staff. This is in addition to the hands-on experience that I come with. As a teacher, I'm having regular sessions with them.*

Sometimes, on Saturdays, we come just to go over the kind of work that I do. We've managed to develop a terms of reference for the office that should be pretty much close to the terms of reference of a financial management institution, just to make sure that everybody knows what they're doing.

BLAIR: I understand from some of the other senators that the salaries you're able to offer the staff are very low and other people have said that it is not possible to attract anyone but students. How did you attract the staff?

KUPEE: *Well, yes, generally the salaries are low. But they were lower—when I took over, the salary of the chief of office staff was less than \$300. Now, the gross salary is \$526. That's not much, but under the circumstances when you have a situation where more than 80% of people have no jobs—again, we're trying to improve that. When you have the whole bucket small, it is difficult to get anything bigger. We've got a proposal before us now, trying to increase that. I'm looking through that. It is quite a difficult thing. That's what makes it difficult to attract people. It's not that there are not people out there. We've been trying for two years to get legal practitioners to come in the legal department. Only now we've managed to get through the civil service agency; we managed to exploit the TOKTEN (Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Nationals) Program. We have three lawyers now that will be paid \$3000 a month. We couldn't pay that from the Senate budget, but we have that commitment from the TOKTEN Program. We are hiring very good lawyers.*

So, perhaps, I don't know, we need to explore those kinds of opportunities. But in-house is going to be quite difficult because the money is just not there.

BLAIR: Are there TOKTEN employees in other parts of—?

KUPEE: *The legislature?*

BLAIR: Yes.

KUPEE: *No, besides the legal section, we don't have any. We're hoping that we can bring them over to this legislative budget office as well, because we won't be able to attract any public financial management giving them 500 dollars a month. So we intend to also take advantage of the TOKTEN Program to bring somebody with a CPA (Certified Public Accountant) who would man that department.*

BLAIR: Right. I assume that one of the challenges in the legislature is that there are legislators from factional groups who are, perhaps, former combatants who have particular strong interests that create problems. How is that sort of thing managed, perhaps on your committee or in other work that you've done in the legislature?

KUPEE: *This is the first time in the history of this country where no one party dominates the legislature. I think if you consider all the parties and independent legislators, you're talking eleven political parties participating in a Senate that comprises of thirty persons, eleven political parties. My own party has the highest number, I think. My party has seven senators and other parties—but you have eleven political parties that are participating in the Senate and the House of Representatives in addition to the independent party.*

So you can see how fragmented we are already. But in addition to that, you're right. You have people who directly participated and were leaders of warring factions who have been elected by their people. You have to tread very thinly between those kinds of interests and the national interests. The experience I have is that the Liberian people do not vote politicians for the party they come from, they vote names. I was running as an independent candidate until the end of the campaign when I decided, eventually, that I wanted to join a political party. I got elected, not because of the political party, but because I come from a county in which 52% of the tribe is not my ethnic group. You understand what I'm saying? That has a lot of influence over what we do, over what happens. So the politics is a little bit—it is not national; it is fragmented into tribal. Not spelled out, but—.

BLAIR: Under the surface.

KUPEE: *Yes. For instance, if you take a political party like the Liberty Party, the standard-bearer of the Liberty Party comes from Bassa, so his stronghold is Grand Bassa County. If you take the political party that I come from, the founder of that party was from Nimba County, so that party is more popular in Nimba County than it is in other counties.*

That's why when we participated in the new electoral law, we planned to do a constitutional reform. The constitution now provides that, for any political party to be registered in Liberia, they must have a minimum of 500 registered members in ten of the—then there were six of the twelve counties. That was it, 500 registered members. In order for you to reduce political parties, you don't want to take a nail and hammer and begin to lock those; you need to increase that number. So in a new electoral law, we've seen that the numbers should be increased to a minimum of 10,000 registered voters. When you do that, you force the smaller parties to merge because they cannot raise 10,000. Then you can automatically reduce the number of parties.

The Senate has passed that. Once it is passed by the House of Representatives, it is going to be the new electoral law of the constitution so that a lot of these

parties—in the last election, there were 22 parties that participated in the election, thirty presidential candidates. Yes, in a country of a population of 3.5 million, with thirty presidential candidates—that's like 100,000 persons to a presidential candidate on average. You don't need all that. But the way to deal with it is to raise the stake. Once you raise the stake, some of these smaller parties will have to come together and join bigger parties, and then we can reduce the number of political parties. I think this is going to be the basis for all this talk about reconciliation and the rest of it. I mean, how can a legislature of this nature that has twenty parties—how can they reconcile with each lawmaker, when two law makers belong to one party in the Senate, three lawmakers belong to this other party. They've got different ideas, different interests, on a single issue. So I think if we believe in the process of political reconciliation in this country, we need to reduce the number of political parties and political groupings. I sincerely believe in that.

BLAIR: We're almost out of time here, but do you have advice for new reformers coming into office in other post conflict countries, perhaps coming into a new legislature or thinking about how to build a new legislature in a post conflict country. Do you have any advice?

KUPEE: *Well, my only advice would be that people who come to the legislature, especially in post conflict countries, the people in these post conflict countries have to try to muster the courage not to bring people in the legislature who do not understand the nature of things.*

BLAIR: Of policy.

KUPEE: *Because, we're talking reconstruction. This is not just the legislature of the past, this is a legislature that needs to understand the importance of building roads. So you need people who understand these issues. In the past, we had people who never went to school. That's okay, but now you need a legislature that understands the national task. And the national task is reconstruction, repairing what has been damaged. We need to have people who have technical backgrounds in understanding the language of reconstruction. That's the disadvantage that we had.*

When you have a piece of legislation, it takes maybe five or six persons who understand the implication of the legislation. The rest of the people are not interested in it. You don't need that kind of legislation in a country that is striving for reconstruction.

BLAIR: Do you have advice for the building of staffs and dealing with the low capacities of staffs?

KUPEE: *My advice from the experience that I had is for the legislature to reduce the number of personal staff, and increase the number of general staff that will be serviceable to the legislature. You don't need a legislator to have twenty staff who are politically appointed by him. What you need is to have staffs that can serve all of the senators. So, increase the number of general staff, professional people, who are there with or without legislators so when the legislators come they come with a skeleton staff that can serve their small interest, but use the general staff that can serve the interests of the legislature. We have the reverse here.*

If you take senators, for instance, we have 16 people as staff. A minimum of 15 people. If you multiply that by 30, per senator, that's a lot. The central administration has a total of 186 people as staff. Compare that to 15 x 30. That's a lot. Four hundred fifty people in the personal staff, compared to 186 in the general staff that should be serving the legislature. So you have 250 people that are politically appointed staff. The people who are supposed to be there as civil servants are very few. I'd like to see the picture reversed. I'd like to see a situation where, just for the maintenance of your office, maybe you have no more than five staff, and the rest would be central administration people who are there to do the people's work irrespective of the politics, irrespective of the political party that he or the legislators come from.

BLAIR: That must be a hard thing to do.

KUPEE: *It is a hard thing to do. Nobody is going to vote for that but me. They're going to beat me down, but that's reality. I don't need fifteen persons in my office, sitting over the desk and knowing nothing to do. What I need is—I need to sit in my office and say, "I need a department of budget to formulate for me the last three quarters, what has happened in the economy. Bring that to me, give it to one of my staff and he will get it to me." But they're going to beat me down, trust me.*

BLAIR: Maybe as a final question, where do you turn for advice and information, when you're thinking of new legislation? Where do you turn?

KUPEE: *We don't have a structured system. First of all we don't have legislative drafters. We just asked for the training of legislative drafters. So what legislators do is that they talk among themselves. They talk to private lawyers. For instance, I am the proponent of the anti-smoking law. I sponsor a lot to prohibit public smoking and the use of alcohol by youth below the age of 18. But before I drafted that law, I talked to the Minister of Health, I talked to lawyers, I talked to representatives of the WHO (World Health Organization), and I realized that even though Liberia is a signatory to the (2003) Geneva (Framework) Convention on Tobacco Control, we have not ratified a national law. We hadn't done a national law to reduce smoking.*

So, with that kind of information, I talked to my lawyer friends and then they helped me draft the law. That's the way it is.

BLAIR: Thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate this conversation. It has been a pleasure.

KUPEE: *You're most welcome.*