

Quello touch adds harmony to FCC

By DOUG HALONEN
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WASHINGTON—Not too many months ago, the Federal Communications Commission had the reputation for being the federal government's answer to Beirut, where conflicts among the commissioners sometimes overshadowed the issues they were working on.

But FCC officials insist that there's a new sense of collegiality and good will in place now.

And they credit the transformation to FCC Chairman Jim Quello's efforts to share some of the powers traditionally associated with his new office.

"The spirit in which our work is going on under (Mr. Quello's) leadership is one of openness and generosity," said FCC Commissioner Ervin Duggan, during a recent public meeting.

Added Andrew Barrett, the agency's other active commissioner, "Jim has done an excellent job of keeping us informed. We're having fun working together, and that makes the job a lot easier."

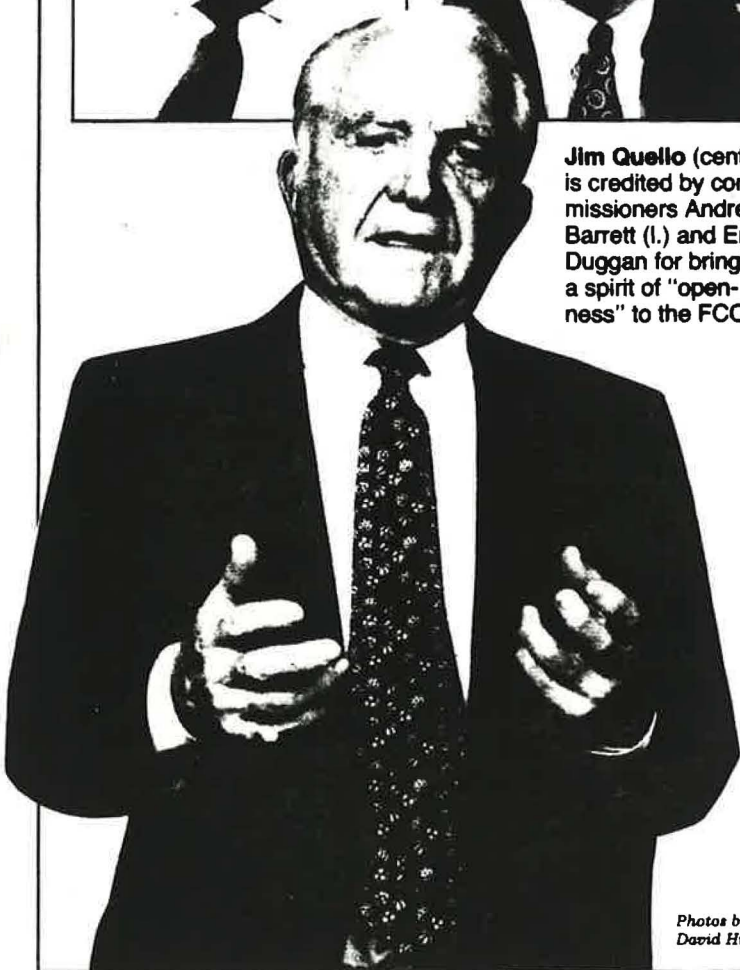
The fourth commissioner, Sherrie Marshall, remains at the FCC but her term has expired and she has recused herself from voting on most issues while she searches for a new job.

Maybe the most surprising thing about this interim FCC, according to some observers, is that it has taken so little time for Mr. Quello to have made such a big difference since assuming the

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Jim Quello (center) is credited by commissioners Andrew Barrett (l.) and Ervin Duggan for bringing a spirit of "openness" to the FCC.



Photos by David Hittle

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chairmanship in early February.

Indeed, FCC sources said one of Mr. Quello's most appreciated innovations has been to open his regularly scheduled Monday morning status meetings, where he's briefed by top bureau personnel, to the legal advisers of both of his voting colleagues.

That may seem to be a small thing. But under former FCC Chairman Al Sikes, sources said those sessions were off-limits to representatives of other commissioners.

That meant the other commissioners had to rely on second-hand reports about happenings at the FCC.

Now their most trusted advisers get a first-hand glimpse.

Also getting upbeat reviews are Mr. Quello's efforts to involve all FCC offices in the earliest stages of the decision-making process for key issues, including implementation of the Cable Act and resolution of the financial interest and network syndication rule controversy.

During Mr. Sikes' tenure, sources said the other commissioners often felt they were kept at bay until the last possible minute before a scheduled vote, then inundated with so much material at once that they were hard-pressed to conduct intelligent reviews.

Mr. Quello said he decided to "open the process" in part to counter a sense of some commissioners that they had been left out in the past.

"I am a pretty open guy and I believe in being completely open with them."

He said the new policy has

already yielded one apparent dividend in improving cooperation at the FCC.

Mr. Quello also said one proof that the new policy is working is that all of the commissioners now appear to be willing to work toward a consensus on fin-syn, an issue that had sorely divided the agency for so long in the past.

"Instead of everyone stonewalling on fin-syn, everyone's willing to talk," Mr. Quello said. "There's a different attitude completely."

Some observers say part of Mr. Quello's willingness to share power stems from the fact that he served as a commissioner for 19 years before assuming the chairmanship, so he knows what it's like to be one step removed from the spotlight.

Also cited is his gregarious and forgiving personality.

"It's a combination of his long

experience and his natural collegiality," said Preston Padden, a senior vice president, affiliates, FBC.

Some FCC observers also note that there have been behind-the-scenes clashes, even during Mr. Quello's relatively short tenure.

However, the sources said Mr. Quello has taken pains to patch up differences to ensure that no hard feelings endure.

Said Mr. Quello, "I've never held personal grudges. It's not worth the inner turmoil they cause."

Meanwhile, FCC sources concede that additional sparks are bound to fly. However, it's clearly hoped that new disputes will focus on policy issues.

"Whenever possible, I try to accommodate their (his colleagues') needs, and if I can't, I'll disagree without being disagreeable," said Mr. Quello. #