

OFFICE OF COMMISSIONER JAMES H. QUELLO

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Bill Harris

FOR FCC'S QUELLO, 16 YEARS ISN'T ENOUGH

BY MARGARET E. KRIZ

In January 1974, James H. Quello was in the middle of a hornets' nest. Consumer groups were trying to stop his confirmation for a seat on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), arguing that Quello, who was then general manager of a major Detroit radio station, should not be allowed to regulate his own industry.

But Quello, a native of Laurium, Mich., and a graduate of Michigan State University, was backed by a number of congressional powerhouses from Michigan: the state's two Senators, Democrat Philip A. Hart and Republican Robert P. Griffin, the Minority Whip, and, in the House, Republican Gerald R. Ford, then the Minority Leader, and Democrat John D. Dingell, with whom Quello has continued to have a close relationship. After eight days of heated Senate hearings, Quello was approved; he's remained at the FCC ever since.

Now 76, Quello—who in July played a key role in mediating internal FCC disputes over a controversial cable report—said in an interview that he'd like to be reappointed to the commission when his current term expires next June. Communications industry executives say he has the backing of Dingell, whose Energy and Commerce Committee has jurisdiction over the FCC, and FCC chairman Alfred C. Sikes. Originally appointed by President Nixon, Quello, a Democrat, was twice reappointed by President Reagan.

In his 16 years on the FCC, the commission and the nation's telecommunications industries have undergone radical changes. "At the time, television and radio were responsible for, I'd say, 80 per cent of the FCC controversy," he said. Today, issues surrounding the growth of the cable and telephone industries sometimes eclipse broadcast. (See this issue, p. 2068.)

Throughout the shift, Quello has been an advocate of free local television and radio broadcasting. "The big problem is how to reconcile the fact that broadcasters are supposed to serve local public interests with advanced technology like the fiber optics in the telephone industry or direct-broadcast satellites in the cable industry," he said.

Richard E. Wiley, who was the FCC's chairman when Quello was first appointed and is now a Washington tele-



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communications lawyer, said Quello "was the person who was our compass on how things really worked in the broadcast industry."

Those ties to the industry also gave Quello "a built-in predisposition for the broadcast industry," according to Stephen R. Effros, president of the Community Antenna Television Association, a Fairfax (Va.) cable industry trade group. "If there was an issue on which the broadcasters wanted the commission to act with regard to cable, they could count on Jim Quello to argue their point of view."

But a former FCC staff member argued that Quello sides with the public, not with the broadcast companies. "Throughout all the years of deregulation and reregulation, Jim Quello has been the champion of the public-interest model for regulating broadcasting," said David L. Donovan, vice president of legal and legislative affairs for Washington's Association of Independent Television Stations, who served on Quello's staff for three years. "It goes down to his underlying belief that broadcasters are public trustees and hold a special responsibility."

Toward that end, Quello has championed regulations requiring cable companies to carry local broadcast television channels and has been a strong supporter of public television. Quello also supports allowing the seven regional Bell operating companies to be common carriers for cable television service, but not to be television programmers or packagers.

Despite his controversial entrance onto the commission, Quello has evolved into a consensus maker in many FCC decisions. "He has the ability to bring divergent points of view together at the FCC on difficult issues," National Association of Broadcasters president Edward O. Fritts said. "Quello has been the glue that's made the whole thing stick through the years on some really difficult issues."

Fritts said Quello "acted as a buffer between a recalcitrant Congress and an FCC that was under fire from the Congress," when Dingell and other key Members openly fought with Mark S. Fowler and Dennis R. Patrick, commission chairmen during the Reagan era.

Indeed, some credit Quello with persuading congressional leaders not to oppose a proposal developed by Patrick that changed the way the FCC regulates the American Telephone & Telegraph Co.'s long-distance telephone rates.

As the FCC's elder statesman, Quello has gained a reputation as a rambling storyteller. "One thing that age does for you," Quello said. "You can tell it the way it is. You don't have to hold back."

But Wiley said that the folksy demeanor should not be mistaken for a lack of substance. "Sometimes some people might underestimate him because he's not a lawyer or something like that," Wiley said. "They do that at their peril, because on the issues he's interested in, he's well versed, and if you go to the Hill, you find that he commands respect." ■

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