

OPINION

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NEWS

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EDITORIAL

In the family

Appointment process geared toward loyalty

A behind-the-scenes look at the gubernatorial appointments to state boards and commissions shows a system that is more focused on rewarding loyalty and repaying political favors than with putting in place the people best qualified to steer policy for the state.

As detailed in a story in The News, the problem isn't unique to the current governor, nor is it limited to one political party over the other — though the argument could be made that the overwhelming number of Republicans in Kansas makes it nearly impossible to achieve any political balance through appointments.

Such cronyism and all-in-the-family behavior, however, is an underlying issue with much that is wrong with government at both the state and federal level.

Far too often, elected officials fill the seats on boards and commissions that regulate, oversee and create policy for the state's industries and agencies with political insiders, while bypassing qualified individuals who could effectively serve the residents of Kansas. Instead, those in power look to their friends, donors, party loyalists, former or would-be legislators — and even their family members — to fill

this level of government that often flies below the radar yet wields a considerable regulatory power.

That system creates a sort of vertical integration of like-mindedness throughout the government structure. The people at the top repay the people who helped them with important appointments, and in turn those appointees demonstrate their gratefulness and loyalty by carrying forward a singular approach to governance. When that system has run its course, those appointees — intimately familiar with the political structure — can find new careers as lobbyists.

Unfortunately, there seems to be little the average person can do to change such a system. Those appointments won't ever be granted to the unknown person who toils daily to provide for a family, and that person likely couldn't spare the time, anyway.

But it is further proof that the political structure is built in a manner that encourages the advancement of a party or a political machine over an effort to protect the interests of a state's residents or a country's citizens. While those boards and commissions might have been created to offer public input on important matters, their purpose today seems to ensure uniformity of thought or serve as a ladder to higher office.

Waiting on courts

Justices' delay on schools holds up short session

With all due respect to Kansas' Supreme Court justices, they need to wrap up their decision on the pivotal lawsuit over state spending on public schools so the Legislature can get on with business.

Some legislators might opt to ignore the decision anyway, but the issue of public school spending — along with the larger state budget — seems suspended while everyone waits in anticipation of the ruling. The 2014 session of our part-time Legislature has begun, and, typically lasting just three months, the business of government needs to proceed. Public education being a huge chunk of the state budget, most all other fiscal decisions — if not the whole legislative session agenda — are contingent on this ruling.

The decision, we keep being told, is due any day now.

This lawsuit is the latest in a long saga pitting school districts against legislators and the governor over how much money is sufficient to fulfill the state's constitutional guarantee for adequately financing its schools.

The last round of litigation con-

cluded in 2006, when the state Supreme Court attempted to put a figure to it, based on studies the Legislature had commissioned. The legislative branch complied at that time, though much to the displeasure of some lawmakers who thought the judicial branch was overstepping its authority.

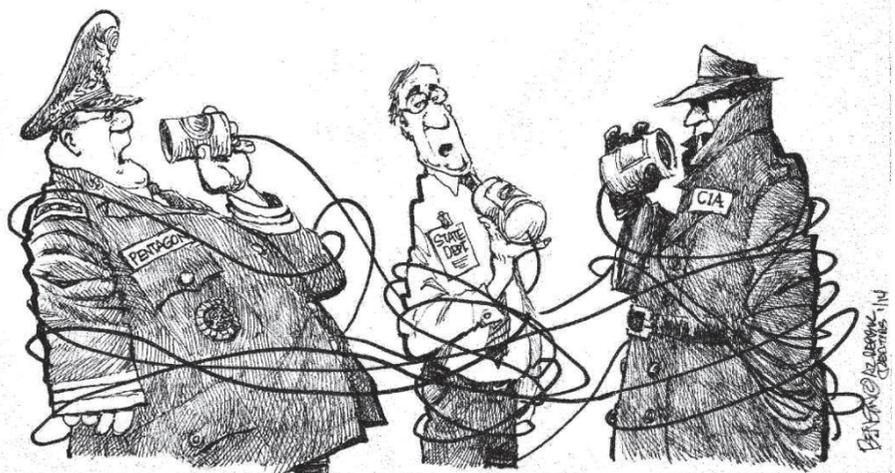
The public school system got a financial boost out of that litigation, but when the economy collapsed a few years later, legislators rolled back spending. Then, when budgets weren't restored after the economy rebounded enough to pay for deep cuts to income taxes championed by Gov. Sam Brownback, school districts went back to the courts.

The state's basic aid to schools per pupil for the 2015 fiscal year is \$3,852, down from a peak of \$4,433. And so now we wait.

The current lawsuit was filed more than three years ago. It worked its way through a lower court first, and the state Supreme Court heard arguments back in October.

Of course, the courts often seemingly work at a snail's pace, and maybe this delay is one way for the courts to prove a point about their own budget cuts at the hand of legislators. But time is of the essence in this case.

THE BENGHAZI CONNECTION



COLUMNISTS

State of the State memo for the 'insiders'

The News' staff of intrepid reporters relies on a variety of sources to provide news tips, perspective and inside information to develop important stories for our readers.

This week, shortly after Gov. Sam Brownback's State of the State speech, one of our sources contacted The News with a document he found while sweeping the floor after the annual event. The paper was one of two Gov. Brownback carried in his breast pocket Wednesday evening — one was his prepared speech for lawmakers, the other a post-speech memo penned for members of his inner circle.

Thanks to this unnamed source, The News is able to share with our readers the contents of the memo.

From : The Desk of Sam Brownback, Governor of Kansas

To : House Speaker Ray Merrick; House Majority Leader Jene Vickrey, Speaker Pro Tem Peggy Mast, Senate President Susan Wagle, Senate Majority Leader Terry Bruce, Lt. Gov. Jeff "The Bank" Colyer
CC : Mike O'Neal, president, Kansas Chamber of Commerce; Dave Trabert, Kansas Policy Institute; David Kensinger, Kensinger and Associates.

Esteemed colleagues,

I'd like to thank you for your leadership these past three years. Together, we've accomplished much. As I said in my speech tonight, we've launched an American Renaissance here in Kansas that will shine as an example for the rest of the country, even the world!

To fully realize this rebirth, we again need to come together as one for the next year. As you know, it's an election year. Despite our great strides in reshaping Kansas I don't quite have this year's election in the bag. Somehow, Rep. Paul Davis — a Democrat in Kansas for Pete's sake — managed to raise nearly as much money as me in a fraction of the time. Thanks again for the generous sacrifice made by Lt. Gov. Jeff Colyer, who managed to find \$500,000 in his couch cushions to loan the campaign at the last minute.

You might have noticed that tonight's speech avoided our goals for the future and instead focused on past accomplishments, ideals and all that feel-good baloney that makes voters swoon. That's because we need to keep our message on point for the next several months and do everything we can to make sure voters forget some of the changes we've made in recent years.

To keep us all on task, and ensure a successful campaign and victorious election in November, I've outlined a strategy for this year:

- Turns out Kansans like education for their children. We totally misjudged this one. From now on we won't refer to teachers as lazy, unqualified, elitist or constant drains on the economy. That was all the rage when I first took office, but it's not going over so well these days. It also turns out that teachers are generally pretty nice people with lots of friends — friends who vote. Our message is: We love education. We want to spend more on it. That's why I'm proposing more money for all-day kindergarten, even though I have no idea how to pay for it.
- DO NOT — I repeat, DO NOT — talk about property taxes. This income tax cut we ram-rodged through (thanks again, Mike — I told you then we owed you one, and I hope you like your new digs at the Kansas Chamber) is saving some of our campaign donors lots of money. But I didn't anticipate that cities and counties would have to raise property taxes so much or so quickly to make up the difference. And for whatever reason, these local voters keep approving school bond issues, additional sales taxes for community projects, mill levies for nursing homes, hospitals and other things that make their hometowns better. It's mind-boggling, I tell you! Property taxes have gone up in 86 counties, and they'll go up more. Heck, someday we might even have to look at assessing farmland at more than 3 percent, and if that happens, we're done for!
- I know that clearing the path for foreign corporate farm ownership was a top priority last year, but



Jason Probst

SATIRE

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it's verboten this year. Wow, county commissioners are a pain in the rump roast when you try to take away their local control to restrict or regulate what goes on in their counties. They're a surly lot who sure know how to cause a lot of trouble. That's why we need Americans for Prosperity to continue its work to influence local elections and get "our" people installed at every level of government.

- Guns are OK. You should talk about guns every chance you get. Even if you don't own one or have never used one, act like you have a filled-to-the-rim gun safe and that

you have spent your entire life pheasant and deer hunting. That seems to go over quite well. In fact, don't ever miss a chance to put together guns, God, family, the Constitution and freedom in a single sentence. It creates a sort of hymnal sound that makes people feel warm and sleepy.

- Someone keep an eye on that Kris Kobach. Generally, the anti-immigrant rhetoric wins voters over around here. But I'm afraid one of these days the "they took our jobs" crowd will figure out that some of our biggest supporters rely on the cheap labor provided by an immigrant workforce. And I'm pretty sure that guy is after my job. Just the other day I caught him in my office measuring the drapes and looking through paint samples.

- Use your connections in your hometown to learn when the local soup kitchens and overnight shelters are open. I know, you might have to travel to parts of town you're not comfortable with, but this is important; those things are filling up faster than you can imagine. When the local newspapers and television stations begin to notice an unusually large number of people gathering for a bowl of gruel each day, we'll schedule press conferences about nothing, just to keep reporters busy and away from stories about human suffering.

And if any of you has any pull with Pope Francis or your local clergy, please ask them to stop preaching about helping the poor and the evils of greed. It's really putting us in an awkward position.

I know this is a lot to ask of you, particularly since this is wildly different than what I've asked you to do the past three years. But we need a quiet legislative session this year if we're going to have a shot at finishing what we've started. All of these things — more business tax breaks, corporate farming, undermining public education, eroding workers' rights and protections, annihilating local control and destabilizing rural Kansas — can be taken up again next year; after I have this election behind me. We have the infrastructure and the people in place to make our dreams a reality — but first I have to secure another four years as governor. After November, if we're successful, I won't have to worry about winning another state election, so we'll be free to do all we've started — and more!

In conclusion, everything we've worked so hard for will be lost if you can't keep those lawmakers in line this session. If any lawmaker starts talking about shooting immigrants from a helicopter like feral hogs, calling teachers and public employees leeches and parasites, breathes a word about property taxes or how local officials should be stripped of self-governance, I want you to pull him or her aside and explain the gravity of this situation.

As I outlined in tonight's address, our theme for this year is prosperity, responsibility, education, opportunity, safety, natural bounty, freedom, sovereignty, reconciliation. Those words and that message will carry us to victory this year and to greater achievements in the years to come.

Once more, thanks for your tireless efforts to reshape Kansas and your understanding of the need to exercise caution and prudence in the year ahead.

God bless Kansas,

Sam Brownback

It's small minds that make a big issue out of other peoples' lifestyles

Everybody's got something. Maybe it's something you were born with, maybe something that happened to you, maybe something you did to yourself through bad habits or neglect. But everybody's got something, some physical or emotional blemish measuring the distance from you to perfection.

Maybe you're a short guy or a gawky woman. Maybe you're ugly. Maybe you've got cellulite, depression, anorexia, alcoholism, gingivitis, psoriasis or a big nose. Maybe you're fat.

Gabourey Sidibe is fat. Morbidly obese, to be exact.

One doubts this comes as news to the 30-year-old actress, best known for her starring role in 2009's "Pre-

vious." Everybody's got something. More to the point, everybody is dealing with something. That's what makes us human.

But although Sidibe surely knows this, once in a while someone — who apparently struggles with nothing — will take it upon themselves to remind her of her weight, usually in the coarsest and cruelest manner they can.

In 2009, for instance, some individual online dubbed her a "gorilla." Sidibe was photographed last week at the Golden Globes and sure enough, here they came again: jibes via Twitter to tell her, in case she has forgotten, that she is fat. One called her "the GLOBE." Another said she missed the "hour-glass look"



Leonard Pitts

by 10 hours. And et cetera.

To which Sidibe shot back that she cried about those comments "on that private jet on my way to my dream job." Obviously, the lady doesn't need me to defend her. So this is not a defense, but simply a question: How did this kind of cruelty — meaning not the occasional fat joke on Letterman, but this sort of truly sadistic and personal meanness — become acceptable? Indeed,

commonplace?

The instinct is to blame Internet anonymity, cowards emboldened by the knowledge that they can't be identified. But the critic who savaged Melissa McCarthy as "tractor-size" signed his name. As did the pundit who called Chris Christie a "fat nightmare."

And with due respect to Christie, the ridicule of McCarthy and Sidibe seems especially harsh — an arrow aimed at a vulnerable spot — given that women and girls are already more susceptible to body image fears and far more likely to suffer eating disorders as a result. But you get the sense the cruelty of it is the entire point.

I don't know why Sidibe

has a weight problem.

Maybe it's emotional, maybe it's medical, maybe it's too many bonbons and too few sit-ups. I do know none of that is my business and none of it makes her anything other than human and entitled to be treated as such.

But we are a people who spend half our days gazing down at screens and that, I think, has changed us. We've become unused to interacting with one another and we're not very good at it anymore. We have, many of us, lost the knack of treating people like people.

You get some sense of this when a polarizing political figure — Ted Kennedy, Robert Novak — passes away and people cheer as if this were not a real

person who just died. You get it when a man holds a sign calling for the president's children to be killed. Or when Bill Maher calls Sarah Palin a cunt. Or when some individual likens Sidibe to a zoo animal.

Too many of us have forgotten a basic rule of what used to be called home training. There are some things you just don't say to or about another human being in a public forum. Saying the thing anyway tells us less about the person you're talking about than about you and your lack of class.

Everybody has something. Gabourey Sidibe is fat. But some of us are trolls.

And she can always diet. Email Leonard Pitts at lpitts@miamiherald.com.

Bennett Chattanooga Times Free Press

