

EDITORIAL

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OPINION

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Editorial

Legislative mindset lies at the heart of DOT abuses

WITH TENS OF millions of dollars squandered on too-generous contracts, it might seem silly even to bring up the \$60,000 that taxpayers have been billed in the last couple of years to provide private secretarial help for five members of the unelected, part-time state Transportation Commission.

But secretary-gate just might be the best illustration yet of the fundamental problem at the state's most unaccountable agency — a problem that leading "reform" efforts would do nothing to correct.

Contrary to popular belief, most debate over restructuring government is not about taking power from the Legislature and giving it to the governor. It's about whether to let the governor run the executive branch of government rather than continuing to fragment that authority among separately elected statewide officers and countless commissioners who, though mostly appointed by governors, operate as a law unto themselves.

The exception is the Transportation Department. Not only is the governing board appointed by the Legislature, but that board actually functions like a mini-legislature: The commissioners horse-trade support for pet projects, or divvy up chunks of tax money for each to have spent as he likes. And just like real legislators, they must tend to constituent requests and complaints — never mind that someone who is not elected and who cannot even be removed by the legislators who appoint him does not actually have any constituents.

That's why these part-time commissioners took it upon themselves to hand-pick their own private secretaries to work in their own private offices — and pay their part-time secretaries far more than most real legislators are allowed to spend for such assistance.

That's why members of a House panel that is crafting an overhaul proposal actually suggested turning these political patronage positions into full-time posts with \$99,000 salaries. Fortunately, that idea was quickly rejected, but the panel still envisions retaining a legislatively appointed commission and giving its members \$1,000 monthly expense accounts — just like real legislators get.

A bit of perspective is in order: The job of the legislative branch is to write the laws and decide where to spend money. It's the job of the executive branch to carry out those laws. In those instances in which an executive agency has a governing board, the job of the board members is to employ a director to actually run the agency.

Some boards also act in a semi-judicial capacity, hearing appeals of agency decisions. Yet members of those boards manage to get by without expense accounts or salaries or their own private secretaries.

One legislator told *The Greenville News* that secretary-gate showed why the current transportation board should be dismissed and a new batch of commissioners appointed. That's half right: It shows why board members should be dismissed — and the board abolished.

The Transportation Department needs to be run by a director who is directly accountable to the state's chief executive, the governor. Anything less will simply sustain the putrid political culture that so obscenely violates the very principle of the separation of powers, and leads to the petty self-dealing, high-level favoritism and gross misuse of precious state resources that has long been a hallmark of our state's highway agency.

Robert Ariail

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Letters to the Editor

Bumbling bureaucrats ruining golden years

Whoever has the idea that the pompous peacocks in control of our government are benevolent needs his head examined.

Take, for instance, a homeowner on a fixed income due to retirement or some other circumstance. The owner works most of his or her life to pay off the mortgage, feeling that he or she has accomplished a major part of the American Dream.

Now comes the nightmare: the dreaded property tax. I understand that taxes are a necessary evil, and if disbursed properly by responsible parties, they are an asset to communities.

However, taxes are being placed in the hands of incapable, indolent bureaucrats who lack knowledge of proper business administration. Their wastrel spending, especially in areas of education and entitlement programs, has become a burden to homeowners with limited incomes, who only wish to enjoy the fruits of their labor in their twilight time.

Due to the constant tax increases, many homeowners are forced to either sell the home of their dreams or deprive themselves of some of the smaller necessities they could have afforded if their hard-earned money were disbursed better.

HARRY MARTIN
Blythewood

Reader dreams of a unified Palmetto State

For the past 25 years or so, my dreams have been of a better South Carolina. A few years ago,

I could see in my mind, almost like a picture or a vision, Williams-Brice Stadium overflowing with people who appeared to be praying and worshipping.

The crowd was so orderly, and I could feel the love they had toward each other. There was such a unity and a sense of agreement. When we as a people can muster the courage to join hands for a time of prayer, repentance and worship in a massive venue such as the stadium, the entire nation will feel the effects of the tremor. This state had the influence to lead a group of states "away from." Now we have a mandate to lead a nation to its knees, "back to," so to speak.

EDDIE C. GUESS
Columbia

Deputy's wife, daughter remembered

I've reflected quite a lot on a tragic event that spoke volumes about the Richland County Sheriff's Department and this community. The event was the devastating fire that took the lives of Investigator Terry Downie's wife, Marie, and daughter, Ashleigh.

These two beautiful individuals were not only the spouse and child of a sheriff's deputy, but two people who were integral members of our department.

Marie was the founder and president of our Spouses Association. She established a support group of spouses that helped deputies' families when in need.

The organization she created was there for her family when it needed it. Her legacy will continue, as we have now established the Marie Downie Spouse of the Year Award. This award will recognize

the spouse who represents the same commitment and dedication to the Sheriff's Department's family that Marie did.

Also, Ashleigh was a very active member of our Explorer program. We will forever remember her by recognizing the Explorer of the Year with the Ashleigh Downie Award.

When the tragedy occurred, the Sheriff's Department family wrapped its arms and hearts around Investigator Downie and his remaining family. While we did this, the community wrapped its arms and hearts around us.

I shouldn't be amazed at the outpouring of support for Investigator Downie. Cards, flowers, money and prayers poured in. Every need was met by the community. This speaks volumes of how the Columbia/Richland County community respects the deputies who serve them.

On behalf of your Sheriff's Department, thank you!

LEON LOTT
Richland County Sheriff
Columbia

Wrong message being sent on sexual matters

Conservatives say teaching sex education, providing contraception and using vaccines to prevent sexually transmitted disease is "sending the wrong message." If people were more educated about sexual matters, they wouldn't get the wrong message. Instead of fully educating people about sexual issues, they want to just tell people to abstain from sex until marriage.

This is a very circular and faulty line of reasoning that at its base stems from conservatives believing other people can't choose what is best for them and feeling

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they need to tell others who do not think like them what to do.

PETER SWANSON
Columbia

Soldier's reverence made service special

On a recent Sunday, my wife and I were sitting in church and were drawn to a man, a visitor, in Army camouflage sitting several rows in front of us.

As the service progressed, we could tell that this man was genuinely moved by his faith, and he knew by heart the hymns, the congregational responses and the like.

We had both decided that, as soon as the service was over, we were going to speak to him and thank him for his being there and for his service to his country. However, it was communion Sunday, and as soon as he finished taking the sacraments, he slipped quietly out the back of the church and was gone.

If this fine soldier happens to read this page, we would like him to know that he made a difference in at least two people's lives simply by his presence and his reverence at Cayce United Methodist Church on what will now forever be a special Sunday morning.

HUBERT SMOAK
Cayce

Join my party, and your wildest dreams will come true. Really.

EVERYBODY talks about the weather, which is as boring and pointless as the cliché suggests. So let's do something about it.

And while we're at it, let's win the war on terror, undermine tyrants around the globe, repair our trade imbalance, make our air more breathable, drastically reduce highway deaths and just generally make the whole world a safer, cleaner place.

It'll be easy, once we make up our minds to do it. But first, you Democrats and Republicans must throw off the ideological chains that bind you, and we independents must get off the sidelines and into the game.

In other words, join my new party. No, not the Unparty I've written about in the past. You might say that one lacked focus.

This one will be the Energy Party. Or the "Responsible Party," "Pragmatic Party" or "Grownup Party." Any will do as far as I'm concerned, but for the sake of convenience, I'm going with "Energy" for now.

Like weather, everybody talks about Energy, but nobody proposes a comprehensive, hard-nosed plan to get 'er done. So let's change that, go all the way, get real, make like we actually know there's a war going on. Do the stuff that neither the GOP nor the Dems would ever do.

I've made a start on the plan (and mind, I'm not speaking for the editorial board here). Join me, and we'll refine it as we go along:

- Jack up CAFE standards. No messing around with Detroit on this one. It's possible to make cars that go 50 miles to the gallon. OK, so maybe your family won't fit in a Prius. Let's play nice and compromise: Set a fleet average of 40 mph within five years.
- Raise the price of gasoline permanently to \$4. When the price of gas is \$2, slap on a \$2 tax. When demand slacks off and forces the



Brad Warthen
Editorial Page Editor

change (including my favorite, light rail). That's one thing we'll spend that new tax money on.

- Another is a Manhattan project (or Apollo Project, or insert your favorite 20th century Herculean national initiative name) to develop clean, alternative energy. South Carolina can do hydrogen, Iowa can do bio, and the politicians who will freak out about all this can supply the wind power.
- Reduce speed limits everywhere

price down to \$1.50, jack the tax up to \$2.50. If somebody nukes some oil fields we depend upon, raising the price to \$3, the tax drops to \$1. Sure, you'll be paying more, but only as long as you keep consuming as much of it as you have been. Which you won't. Or if you do, we'll go to \$5.

- You say the poor will have trouble with the tax? So will I. Good thing we're going to have public transportation for the gas tax money. No excuses.
- Build nuclear power plants as fast as we can (safely, of course). It makes me tired to hear people who are stuck in the 1970s talk about all the dangerous waste from nuke plants. Nuclear waste is compact and containable. Coal waste (just to cite one "safe" alternative) disperses into the atmosphere, contaminates all our lungs and melts the polar ice caps. Yeah, I know; it would be keen if

everyone went back to the land and stopped using electricity, but give it up — it ain't happening.

- Either ban SUVs for everyone who can't demonstrate a life-or-death need to drive one, or tax them at 100 percent of the sales price and throw that into the win-the-war kitty.
- If we don't ban SUVs outright, aside from taxing them, launch a huge propaganda campaign along the lines of "Loose Lips Sink Ships." Say, "Hummers are Osama's Panzer Corps." (OK, hot shot, come to my blog and post your own slogan.) Make wasting fuel the next smoking or DUI — absolutely socially unacceptable.
- Because it will be a few years before we can be completely free of petrol, drill the ever-lovin' slush out of the ANWR, explore for oil off Myrtle Beach, and build refinery capacity. But to keep us focused, limit all of these activities to no more than 20 years. Put the limit into the Constitution.

You get the idea. Respect no one's sacred cows, left or right.

Yeah, I know some of this is, um, provocative. But that's what we need. We have to wake up, go all-out to win the war and, in the long run, save the Earth. Pretty soon, tyrants from Tehran to Moscow to Caracas will be tumbling down without our saying so much as "boo" to them, and global warming will slow within our lifetimes.

Then, once we've done all that, we can start insisting upon some common sense on entitlements, and health care. Whatever works, whatever is practical, whatever solves our problems — no matter whose ox gets gored, or how hard you think it is to do what needs doing. Stop whining and grow up. Leave the ideologues in the dust, while we solve the problems.

How's that sound? Can any of y'all get behind that? Let me know, because we need to get going on this stuff.

Join the party at my — I mean, our — Web Headquarters: <http://blogs.thestate.com/brad-warthensblog/>.