



State GOP party confuses politics with governance

By **LANNY KELLER**

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The Republican Party of Louisiana is becoming the party of "no." The leadership would probably rather be known as the party of "no new taxes" but that would be generous to the irresponsible policies pushed by the party this year.

Admittedly, not many people really care about what the policy positions of the party leadership may be. That also goes for the Democratic Party of Louisiana.

The Democrats' chairman, Jim Bernhard of Baton Rouge, got in more than a spot of trouble when the party put out automated phone calls urging citizens to contact legislators on behalf of an ethics bill proposed by Gov. Kathleen Blanco.

Legislators of both parties objected to the bill, proposing much more extensive disclosures of sources of income by legislators and candidates for the Legislature. It died in committee, but only after Bernhard and the party were castigated for their intervention in the debate.

Arguably, Bernhard was on the right side of the question on the merits. It was his methods that caused needless trouble for the Blanco administration.

The Republican Party is now headed by a State Central Committee slate elected in 2004 drawn from the so-called "religious right" of the party.

Party Chairman Roger Villere of New Orleans and his colleagues were once almost purged from the state committee by Gov. Mike Foster and his allies, but the old crowd is back, and Villere is using the pulpit of party chairman to push anti-tax messages.

Peel back the onion just a little bit, and the anti-tax messages start to sound a good bit less appealing than the sound bites.

Take the opposition to Blanco's proposed \$1-a-pack increase in cigarette taxes.

Villere and Co. opposed it vociferously, even though some Republicans,

notably Rep. Carl Crane of Baton Rouge, chairman of the House Education Committee, backed it as a source of money for teacher pay raises.

The party's solution was a free-lunch proposal: Use a higher revenue estimate to plow one-time money into the health-care budget, and thus fund the pay raises for fiscal 2006. Blanco and Co. rightly argued, and were supported by good-government analysts at the Public Affairs Research Council, that this would merely postpone the day of reckoning until fiscal 2007 or thereafter.

It made no provision for declining federal aid for the poor's medical care proposed by President Bush's budget, and it came as the party also pushed for income tax breaks for the best-off taxpayers.

Villere's group opposed the landmark 2002 Stelly tax reform plan, backed by Foster, that increased some income taxes in exchange for breaks on sales taxes.

The party positions against the cigarette tax allied the GOP caucus in the House with the position of the tobacco companies, one of the least-appreciated lobbying groups in corporate America.

Some of the anti-tax drumbeat picked up an old theme of the GOP's ultra-right: Toe the party line or get out.

"Any Republican who votes for the tax increase should seriously consider switching his or her party registration," said commentator Jeff Crouere of New Orleans, a former party executive director.

There is some political mileage in this anti-tax argument, even if Blanco's position is more responsible in the long run, but instant gratification is a powerful force in politics, and the GOP caucus, in the words of columnist John Maginnis, "is trying to act a little more like a real caucus."

Sen. Gerald Theunissen, R-Jennings, told PAR's conference before the session that it's getting politically harder to vote for any taxes.

Beyond purely negative attack-dog politics, what does the GOP have to offer? Its Foster administration leaders in the Legislature were mostly shoved aside when Blanco took office, but that is where the governing wisdom of the party lies, and the central committee's new leadership never cottoned to Foster and his leadership team much anyway. What happens when the party's position radically diverges from some of its leading lights in the Legislature?

If the party takes a position on the issues before the Legislature, its views ought to be better thought-out at a minimum. Just saying "no" doesn't represent governance, but politics.

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