



Emily Metzgar: View latest success as a small success

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With the special session of the Louisiana Legislature over, the battle to control interpretation of events is under way.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco's comments upon adjournment implied that because the Republicans voted together in the special session to prevent raising the spending cap, the specter of partisanship had reared its ugly head in Louisiana.

She said, "Unfortunately for Louisiana, at the very beginning of this session, House Republicans set a sour tone and decided that party politics was more important than our people."

Translation: Don't blame me for the session's failure.

But others might have offered a different summary of events: "Fortunately for Louisiana, the state's enormous budget surplus was not squandered on a plan to promote old-time populist policies in exchange for future electoral support."

Whoever succeeds in getting the public to accept their interpretation of events is the victor in the battle of "spin." But spin only works when there's enough truth to ensure that the spun rhetoric doesn't collapse under its own weight.

And the problem with the governor's efforts to control public perceptions of the session is that her interpretation of events doesn't correspond to reality.

In her comments following the session, Blanco asked, "How much longer must we wait to invest in our teachers, our state workers, our school bus drivers, our sheriffs and our firefighters as well? How much longer does it take to get fair pay for our citizens? How much longer must we wait to cut taxes for our families and businesses?"

"How much longer "»" indeed.

How much longer must the people of Louisiana wait to see responsible stewardship of public resources? How much longer must the people of Louisiana be expected to tolerate political shenanigans instead of responsible policy making?

How much longer must the people of Louisiana pray that someday their long-term needs will be addressed by decision-makers with the people's best interests at heart?

One person's partisanship is another's commitment to government accountability. While the governor may be right to imply that partisanship played a role in the special session, it would be wrong to assume that partisanship is always bad.

Certainly, partisanship manifested in uncompromising commitment to certain political outcomes is bad. It can lead to obstructionism and finger-pointing. But partisanship manifested in uncompromising commitment to certain core principles can be good. It can lead to long-term strategic thinking over short-term political goals.

The fact is that government works best when there's a system of checks and balances. But for a long time, Louisiana has lacked those checks and balances. And the state has paid for it. With no such system in place, politicians got the short-term political benefits they seek, the people got just enough from the politicians to remain complacent, and blissful ignorance reigned while the state slipped further behind the rest of the country.

So maybe it's time to stop calling the latest session a failure. Maybe it's better viewed as a small success. As the Public Affairs Research Council has noted, "The best outcome of this session was an early start to the spending debates that will shape Louisiana's future."

If true, that would be a success indeed.

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