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Jindal: Totally committed to ambivalence

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Politics is supposed to be the art of the compromise, which Gov. Bobby evidently interprets as never going the whole hog.

He has just vetoed \$16 million in pork, but left more than twice that amount for legislators to divvy up with their friends back home.

He feels so strongly about ethics reform that he thinks conflicts of interest should be prohibited for all legislators, except the ones he exempts.

He is no less devoted to open government, just so long as his administration can operate free of public scrutiny.

He wants higher standards in the public schools, but signs a bill allowing creationist fairy tales in science class.

When he can't compromise, Jindal can do a passable crawfish impression, as in the brouhaha over the pay raise the Legislature voted itself in the last session. After promising not to interfere, Jindal up and vetoed the bill, although he may have felt he had little choice, with the populace appearing on the verge of revolt.

That, of course, did not endear him to legislators, who tend to place a high value on a governor's veracity. Had Jindal told them from jump-street a raise was out, they would have grumbled for sure, but they would not have been so furious as they were when it turned out that he was not as good as his word.

If part of the art of governing is to keep legislators sweet, that means ensuring they know what to expect. This is not an administration with a talent for timely communication.

Jindal did issue a warning back in May about the earmarks that legislators graft onto the budget every year in order to show the folks that they can bring home the bacon.

Jindal declared that no earmark for a "non-governmental organization" would be allowed unless it had "a statewide or substantial regional impact," had been "presented or openly discussed during the legislative session," qualified as "a state agency priority" and had been detailed in "the proper disclosure form published online prior to funding."

If he had drawn up any criteria for money earmarked for government agencies, Jindal did not reveal what they were.

Legislators, presumably thinking he couldn't possibly be serious, proceeded, in the time-honored fashion, to lard up the budget with almost 1,000 appropriations for loosely defined local projects and pluck price tags from the air. By the time they were finished, they had laid claim to \$55 million.

Jindal, however, was half-serious -- well, about one-third serious if you want to be picky -- and whittled the money grab down to \$39 million.

He nevertheless earned a certain amount of praise in the public prints, and the Public Affairs Research Council pronounced his vetoes a "good first step" toward budgetary restraint. "For too long," Jindal righteously declared, "state government has spent and spent with little regard for taxpayers' money."

Perhaps it is a little early for self-congratulation. Considering that the annual budget for this relatively small state is \$30 billion a year, opportunities to wield the budget ax must abound.

Plenty, although by no means all, of legislators' pet local projects are worthy enough in themselves, but handing out millions a year, with little oversight or accountability, is no way to run a railroad. As PAR observes of Jindal's cuts, "With no scoring mechanism or uniform evaluation procedure for each local project granted funding, the public is left to wonder why those were left in the budget to compete with statewide needs for state tax dollars."

We'll just have to wonder so long as Jindal remains committed to a policy of ambivalence.

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