



Frankfort: Capital of the State of Denial

By Jim Waters

The famous author Kurt Vonnegut, who died April 11, told the Associated Press in 2005: “I like to say that the 51st state is the state of denial. It’s as though a huge comet were heading for us, and nobody wants to talk about it.”

Vonnegut said this while discussing his well-known views about our nation’s petroleum supply. But he could have been talking about Gov. Ernie Fletcher and how he’s spun Kentucky’s anemic economic performance during his chaotic administration.

One of Fletcher’s latest inane campaign commercials captures the economic nonsense whirling from the mouths of Fletcher spinmeisters.

It’s a five-ticket ride.

“Our economy booms,” the voice-over announces as the camera captures “Fletch” intensely involved in doing governor-like tasks staged for television – perhaps handing out blacktop “incentives.”

If “our economy booms,” why do the corporate jets of large companies fly over Kentucky and land in states such as Tennessee, which have right-to-work laws and lower tax rates?

If “our economy booms,” why do 24.7 percent of Kentucky’s adults collect disability checks? (If you believe all those folks really have a disability, you could – “could” – have taken up residence in the state of denial.)

If “our economy booms,” why do statistics reveal only three states with higher unemployment rates in February than Kentucky? By contrast, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the commonwealth’s jobless rate equaled the national average when Fletcher took office some three years ago.

The governor likes to say that more Kentuckians work now than ever. We should all applaud that reality. But to pretend Fletcher’s economic policies led to that means that you moved to the state of denial. Actually, more Kentuckians work *in spite of* this governor’s economic policies, not because of them. With the economic revival experienced by the nation following the recession of 2000-2001 and the ensuing tax cuts promoted by President George W. Bush, much of the entire nation experienced job increases.

If “our economy booms,” why does the Bureau of Economic Analysis report that Kentuckian’s personal incomes dropped nearly 4 percent during the past year, down from No. 44 to No. 46 in the nation? This leaves only four states with lower personal incomes.

No wonder Fletcher, who both governs and campaigns in a near-constant state of denial, became the first governor in Kentucky history to face a challenge in his party’s primary. Perhaps the only thing more annoying than Fletcher’s denial of Kentucky’s sluggish economy is that most candidates who want his job also live in the same state of denial.

Take, for instance, the Democratic gubernatorial debate earlier this week, which consumed two hours of “denial” time on Kentucky Educational Television (KET).

At that gathering, Steven Beshear indicated he would be quite comfortable in denying the people the power our Founding Fathers intended when they established a representative democracy.

“When Steve Beshear is governor, the governor’s office is going to be more powerful than either the president of the Senate or the speaker of the House,” said the blustering Beshear. “You’re going to have to prove to everyone you know how to run the show, and that you’re going to run the show.”

Beshear must have been sick the day his high-school civics class covered how the founders respected the people’s representatives. Denial comes easier when you don’t really know the truth.

While showing little respect for the separation of powers intended to ensure people receive proper representation in Frankfort, Beshear promised a “shakedown” cruise after he gets elected.

Scary. Then again, I guess I could just deny he really meant it.

House Speaker Jody Richards remains in a state of shocking denial, too.

Richards boasted at the KET debate about receiving the “Friend of Education” award by the Kentucky Education Association.

Apparently the teachers union greatly appreciated the speaker’s denial of a plan offered during the recent legislative session that would change future state-employee retirement benefits from “defined benefits” to a “defined contribution” plan like the rest of us have. Richards laid out in detail how such a plan represents a “vast, right-wing conspiracy.”

Denial comes with perks. If you deny the huge comet exists, your TV commercials can always claim it took you by surprise.

– Jim Waters is the director of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky’s free-market think tank. You can reach him at jwaters@bipps.org. You can read previously published columns at www.bipps.org.