



Special sessions: The good, the bad and the ugly

By Jim Waters

Surely I'm not the only Kentuckian who remembers House Speaker Jody Richards promoting annual legislative sessions as the ticket to more efficient and cheaper state government.

Richards promised that annual sessions would give lawmakers the time needed to adequately address issues and greatly reduce – if not eliminate – the need for further tax-and-spending assaults on taxpayers, better known as “special sessions.”

A majority of voters bought it. I voted “no.”

In retrospect, I might have made the wrong decision.

Without annual sessions, the bureaucracy ran roughshod over everyone. Lawmakers made critical decisions during committee meetings held in non-session years while no one paid attention.

Still, I didn't buy Richards' assurance that government would become more efficient and less costly. I was right about that.

Actually, “more efficient” government is oxymoronic. It's like being “a little bit pregnant,” eating “kosher ham” or watching “Unsolved Mysteries.” You can have less government, more government, open government and closed government. But “more efficient” government?

Such nonsensical terminology may be politically correct nowadays, but our Founding Fathers rejected the idea of government as anything but a necessary evil. They beat back the threat of a tyrannical British monarchy and ratified a Constitution that recognized government as a force to be restrained not a partner to embrace.

Thomas Jefferson warned that the natural tendency of government is to grow, forcing liberty to retreat. To prove it, ask: What's the natural tendency of Frankfort's politicians when they fail to address pressing and important issues during regularly scheduled legislative sessions?

The answer: More government, of course!

Gov. Ernie Fletcher now ponders calling a “special session” to deal with the pension crisis involving retirement benefits for state workers.

At least the governor proposed that such a session be held following the May primary. This would give lawmakers time to research the issue and come to Frankfort prepared for informed deliberation and effective voting.

However, yet another paradox rises: Policymakers – Richards included – have resisted changes in the pension system that won't benefit them in the next election. How can they ever adequately explain their failure to deal with this important issue while expending great amounts of time and energy on matters that could have been settled in a few days at most?

Perhaps they could send out glossy campaign ads similar to those mailed by Fletcher explaining to voters why the job didn't get done on time. (The cost of those mailers alone could make significant contributions toward shoring up the pension system.)

Just be forthright, Mr. Richards. Your PR folks and campaign machine won't like it, but a dose of honest assessment might do wonders.

Tell Mr. and Mrs. Kentuckian:

“We can't get our act together here in Frankfort. We've known for eons about the pension system crisis, yet we just couldn't break our addiction to wastefully spending your hard-earned tax dollars on pork-barrel projects that should have been used to make pension funds solvent.

“And we just couldn't bring ourselves to make changes in the way benefits for state workers are determined. You see, we just can't sneeze, burp or answer nature's call without getting approval from the labor unions.

“So, no, we didn't do anything about this critical issue during the regular session. But by golly, Mr. and Mrs. Kentuckian, we *did* spend gobs of precious limited time during the session raising the speed limit, increasing the minimum wage and passing a bill to protect state social workers – bills that could have passed in a week at most.”

It remains a longstanding – and costly – tradition for Kentucky's politicians to dawdle, dally and defer during the regular legislative sessions and then insist on the need for special sessions with a price tag of \$50,000 a day.

It's time for new traditions. I suggest we pay lawmakers \$100,000 a year and deduct \$1,000 for each day they meet, whether in regular or special sessions. After all, Kentucky's Constitution allows for annual sessions if needed but does not *require* lawmakers use every day.

Using my plan, want to bet most of these “meeting” days would disappear?

Heck, I might even pull for longer sessions with this plan. At least, state politicians could no longer use special sessions to collect political points without paying some price for failure.

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