



Let the debates begin

By Jim Waters

Venezuela with its thug-for-a-president, Hugo Chavez, isn't the only place in the world where an absence of debate is taking place. It's happening in Frankfort, Kentucky, too.

How else can we describe the utter lack of open and public debate in Frankfort these days about important issues involving our mediocre education system and how our tax dollars are being spent?

Now, before you think I've gone completely off my rocker in my Caracas-to-Frankfort connection, consider that Gustavo Coronel, the former head of Venezuela's state-owned petroleum company, blames "the absence of debate" for having a dramatically negative affect on the people of his beloved land.

In Venezuela, that affect has manifested itself in the form of increased corruption. And while I'm not claiming that there currently is any more corruption in Frankfort than before some of the debate-avoidance schemes concocted by supercilious politicians and bureaucrats in recent years, I am proposing that a lack of debate also has an injurious effect on our beloved commonwealth and its hard-working citizens.

Our nation's founders engaged in vehement public debates with all of the intellectual and experiential fodder they could muster. The result was the Constitution, from which history's longest-standing democratic republic arose.

That's a much different approach than the one taken by the political leaders of Kentucky's House and Senate during last year's budget session. The political bosses – "pol-bosses" for short – of the House and Senate hijacked the budget process by meeting behind closed doors to decide how our hard-earned tax dollars would be spent.

Even hard-working citizens and taxpayers who happened to show up in Frankfort during these "negotiations" would not have been allowed into the room to hear the discussions.

In fact, there's a good chance that the person elected to represent those citizens in Frankfort wasn't even allowed into the room. Perhaps the next time one of these pol-bosses will be considerate enough to post a sign on the closed, locked and guarded doors that reads: "No debate here. Only pol-bosses allowed." That way, no one will get their hopes up that there may actually be a substantive debate on earmarks or pork or debt or any such thing.

The pol-bosses went so far as to put tape on the windows of their meeting room while cordoning off the hallway outside with armed, muscle-bound state troopers to ensure no dangerous people – especially those pesky reporters or any concerned citizen – snuck in to hear how our tax dollars

were being traded for big sloppy helpings of pork. Presumably, even *other lawmakers* would have encountered the troopers had they tried to enter.

Is this Caracas or America?

When uninvited lawmakers finally received copies of the pol-bosses' secret budget, they only had about 24 hours to vote – up or down – on the most important legislation they consider during their tenures. No debate. No discussion. And hardly any disagreement with the pol-bosses.

Avoiding debate isn't confined to the cordoned-off hallways of Frankfort, either. It's also infected the state's education bureaucracy and its misguided supporters.

More than a year ago, the Bluegrass Institute invited all major groups involved in the education of Kentucky's children to debate the resolution: "Kentucky's parents should be allowed to send their children to the public school of their choosing."

The invitation went out to several people, including education commissioner Gene Wilhoit. None accepted the offer. Some rejected it; worse, others, including Wilhoit, didn't even bother to respond. The offer included allowing these people to choose the venue, moderator, media panel and half the audience. The institute even offered to foot the bill.

No go.

To his credit, Bob Sexton, executive director of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, responded. But Sexton's response shows that those tied to the status-quo's teat want a real debate about as much as a slum lord wants the local building inspector nosing around.

In his response, Sexton wrote:

"At the moment we are promoting many policies and reforms that will improve Kentucky's public schools for Kentucky's children, but the topic you mention is not on our list. We have no position on it. We therefore have nothing to debate."

While Bob seems like a nice enough fellow, it appears he's slightly confused about the facts. According to the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), there's plenty to debate, including why only 26 percent of Kentucky fourth-graders are proficient in math and what can be done about the fact that reading proficiency among our state's eighth-graders fell from 34 percent to 31 percent between 2003 and 2005.

If Sexton is convinced he has better ideas about improving our state's education system, shouldn't he be able to hold his own in a debate?

But the chances of that happening are about as slim as Hugo Chavez losing his next "election."

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