



Needed: More statesmanship, less showmanship

By Jim Waters

Where have all the statesmen gone? Not to Frankfort — a fact made painfully obvious by shenanigans occurring in the Capitol these days.

Mischief abounds on both sides of the political aisle.

But I'm with Speaker Jody Richards on his decision to adjourn the House in lieu of Gov. Fletcher continuing a special legislative session.

Can you blame Richards? Why participate in a big taxpayer-financed campaign rally for the opposing party's governor?

But this newfound backbone doesn't make Richards a real statesman. He's just a savvy politician who happens to get it right on this issue.

Richards says the governor cannot justify the "urgent" need for the session. He's right.

Not a shred of evidence exists that this session needed to go forward to attract alternative-fuel companies to Kentucky. They made no promises to come — even with incentives approved during a special session.

Richards also says no consensus exists on the agenda, which could result in a drawn-out session. He's right.

Let's face it. The governor just wants to make the other side look bad — on the taxpayer's dime. Richards said taxpayers shouldn't pay \$60,000 a day for political posturing in Frankfort by this clumsy administration. He's right.

Now, if Richards just packed some credibility. His past behavior indicates he knows a little about politically posturing — even if he took the right stance on this trip down the catwalk.

Since Kentucky voters approved annual sessions in 2000, governors have now called five special sessions. You didn't hear Richards expressing concern about those. Why? Because he thought they would benefit him and his party.

But now that a special session might benefit the other side, he finds some vertebrae and opposes it. You can call it partisanship or gamesmanship — but not statesmanship.

I fear too many Kentuckians just surrender to the idea that Frankfort serves as a perpetual political playground. I hear far too many people sigh and say: "That's just the way it's always been in Kentucky politics."

That needs to change.

And so I return to Henry Clay, who represented Kentucky in and dominated the U.S. Senate during the mid-19th century. Clay became known as “The Great Compromiser.” He defended deeply held principles but he set aside personal interests to bring people with very different points to consensus. Clay kept them at the table until: (a) all points of view were sufficiently heard; and (b) participants reached agreement.

So, how would Clay clean up the playground in Frankfort?

He might suggest to Fletcher: “Governor, if, in fact, you really believe this session is necessary to bring alternative-fuel companies and jobs to Kentucky and not just about your re-election, prove it by giving up your claim to pummel taxpayers with an additional 60-plus additional spending projects you added to the special session’s agenda.”

To Richards, he could say: “You may be right in principle. But considering your past support of special sessions, it rather appears like sour grapes on your part. Why don’t you come back to Frankfort and wrap this up in a couple of days? If these companies don’t choose Kentucky, taxpayers haven’t lost a dime and you have plenty of political ammunition.”

Then he would tell both sides: “When voters approved annual sessions in 2000, lawmakers promised an end to these special ‘debacles.’ You must keep that promise.”

Clay became the first person ever to lie in state in the U.S. Capitol following his death in 1857. But it wasn’t because he was perfect. At one time, he owned 60 slaves.

Nevertheless, he always placed the good of the country above his interests. His headstone states: “I know no North-no South-no East-no West.”

In Frankfort, what statesmen will make the good of the commonwealth – and not just the next election – the paramount object of their public service?

I believe Kentuckians hunger for a display of that kind of leadership in the next election – and in the next and the next and the next . . .

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