



Fishing for a way to save money and get politicians off the hook

By Jim Waters

“Remember,” admonished W.C. Fields, “a dead fish can float downstream, but it takes a live one to swim upstream.”

We can tweak that line to help Kentuckians understand why the state continually fails to pass a budget on time and why drastic change must come in the political process to foster economic revival in the commonwealth.

So here goes: “Remember, opportunistic politicians float downstream, but it takes a statesman to swim upstream.”

Many examples help distinguish the two.

Believe it or not, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev seemed to understand the difference — in theory, anyhow. Gorbachev once said: “What is the difference between a statesman and a politician? A statesman does what he believes is best for his country. A politician does what best gets him re-elected.”

Here’s the issue: All politicians think — and often claim — they are statesman. Few are. In fact, few can be.

After all, a state lawmaker who goes to Frankfort determined to do what’s best, not what’s easiest, may not last long. If he or she promotes or even supports reform — or unpopular spending cuts, especially if those cuts affect directly constituents who vote — and the programs involved have dug in, well-financed and aggressive opponents — the next election gets tougher.

“So those who survive and succeed represent a miniscule proportion of those who set out to achieve unpopular objectives,” wrote Charles Rowley, a George Mason University economist.

It’s commendable that Gov. Beshear has [proposed a budget](#) for the upcoming special legislative session that slashes spending and limits debt. But he did so after originally proposing a budget that included [\\$780 million](#) in expanded gambling revenue, for which there was literally no legislative support.

It’s even more commendable that the state Senate stood its ground against the House’s outrageously expensive proposal to spend \$1 billion on capital projects. But that invites political backlash.

While relations between the House and Senate have thawed and we will probably get a much-more reasonable budget, the underlying conflict remains between those with no interest in making tough spending decisions about state government’s programs and personnel versus policymakers who demonstrate a willingness to take heat and do the best thing for the commonwealth.

The University of Kentucky's John Garen has come up [with a way](#) to foster tough decision-making necessary to bring state spending under control that would have long-term impact, instead of the fiscal fire drill that occurs during every budget session.

Garen, who holds a doctorate in economics, recommends a "program closing commission" modeled after the Federal Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission, called BRAC, formed in the late 1980s and which took its latest action in 2005.

BRAC recommends which military bases should close and which functions should be consolidated among bases. After a set amount of time for public input, the BRAC report is either fully accepted or fully rejected as presented.

Before BRAC, few tough decisions on bases could be made. Every politician in a state with a base would pull out all the stops to keep a base open. But BRAC limited the influence of politics and lobbying. Communities still got their say but painful, yet necessary, decisions got made.

Garen suggests a "Kentucky Program Closing Commission" to carefully assess which state programs ought to continue, which ought to consolidate and which ought to get cut altogether.

Such a bipartisan commission comprised of leading economists and former governors might work.

At least, it would begin to trim budget fat while allowing politicians to point fingers without endangering their re-election chances. They could, for instance, point fingers at the commission – "the commission made me do it" – and feel good about it, as would taxpayers who see significant cuts in government spending finally happen.

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