

Viewpoint

Pageantry outside, childishness inside the Capitol

As I trudged up the steps of the Capitol Friday morning, still sleep-deprived from the recent interminable late-night sessions of the General Assembly — which is the state's answer to the need for adult day care — I witnessed what I needed.

It was a family of five. They were dressed up; they were taking pictures of themselves on the Capitol's north steps. They were happy to be there. They tried to enter through a door that's been locked since September 2001.

It was a big deal for them to be visiting their Capitol. It made me smile and a little teary, but it could have been the vestiges of the head cold that made the last days of the regular legislative session seem like a waking nightmare.

The Capitol building is so impressive in its 130-year-old, over-the-top elegance, I didn't tell the visitors it really belies the prevailing juvenility.

Yeah, the General Assembly and the Teflon governor have let them down.



KEN DIXON

Where, oh where did it all go wrong in this year of the \$8 billion deficit?

It started last fall, when majority Democrats said they didn't believe that the tsunami of red ink was curling up for splashdown in six months.

That was around the time that the House leadership was passing from the moderate Jim Amann, of Milford, to Chris Donovan, of Meriden, a career union organizer who took over a huge, 114-member caucus.

Then, in February, Gov. Jodi Rell, she of the high approval ratings and the thin skin, masterminded a beautifully cynical low-ball "no new taxes" budget of \$38.4 billion for the two years starting July 1.

If she didn't know right away,

the governor became aware within a couple weeks of delivering the proposal that it was \$2 billion or more out of balance, because of sharply reduced recessionary revenues. Rell didn't bother revising it until 10 days ago, so the governor could conveniently contend all winter and into the spring that her budget was balanced and didn't raise taxes.

Democrats promised to expedite the usual committee process, but after two key committees approved a \$38.2 billion package that included more than \$3 billion in new taxes, highlighted by higher rates for the wealthy and the end of the \$500 property tax credit on the income tax, they balked at actually passing it.

The reluctance to vote on their own budget — and the possible cleansing experience of a Rell veto — had a lot to do with the Senate, where the 24-12 Democratic majority is just enough to override Rell.

Since there's solid opposition from various Democrats to higher taxes, including Sen. Gayle Slossberg, D-Milford, Sen. Bob Duff,

D-Norwalk, and Sen. Andrew McDonald, D-Stamford, it became obvious why Senate President Don Williams, D-Brooklyn, was reluctant to push the issue and possibly threaten his presidency.

Minority Republicans this year, led by the Alamo-like 37 GOP members of the House, enacted political-guerilla warfare antics this year, extending debate for hours on end, and offered their own budget, which would be a full billion bucks below the Democrats.

In the Senate, Sen. Sam Caligiuri, R-Waterbury, seemed in full stride in his campaign against U.S. Sen. Chris Dodd, and Senate Minority Leader John McKinney, R-Fairfield, seemed equally engaged in his inevitable attempt to turn U.S. Rep. Jim Himes, D-4, into a single-term footnote.

For the record, the GOP even got Democrats to vote against their own budgets as part of the twisted amendment process that made the stultifying end game of the regular legislative session of 2009 moderately interesting.

While this inactivity was essen-

tially paralyzing the budget process, the lobbyists who actually know the nuts and bolts of the hundreds of bills passed this year have observed a changing of the guard in the House, which they say now seems like an outpost of AFSCME.

This is around the time that, in past years, Republican lawmakers have gotten cut out of budget negotiations. Rell and Democrats need to agree on a calculus of increased revenues, such as higher sales and/or income taxes, as well as spending cuts.

It has been that simple for months.

But the ornate Connecticut Capitol is where the arrogance of the majority meets the sanctimony of the minority.

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Voter participation always welcomed

It's power to the people — sometimes.

In a 2009 General Assembly regular session that will be remembered more for what lawmakers did not accomplish (such as their failure to approve a new two-year state budget) rather than for what they did, state majority Democratic lawmakers took a bold step to remove a governor's power to appoint a U.S. senator, with two limited exceptions, if a vacancy occurs in the office.

The legislation is a welcome step in affording voters like you and me a greater voice in choosing a replacement because the bill calls for a special election to be held if a senator unexpectedly vacates office before their six-year term is completed.

However, where Assembly Democrats faltered in furthering this idea of participatory democracy is by not considering extending the special election provisions to vacancies that might occur in the positions of the state constitutional officers — that is, the secretary of the state, the comptroller, the state treasurer and the attorney general.

If one looks back at recent history, let's say 1980 to 2009, there have been six times when constitutional officers — who, like governors, are elected to four-year terms — left office through death or resignation before their terms expired. To find a U.S. Senate seat vacancy, you have to go back to 1952 when U.S. Sen. Brien McMahon died and Prescott Bush was appointed to fill the vacancy.

Indeed, there's a modicum of truth to the arguments that Assembly Republicans continually made throughout the session when they claimed the bill was unnecessary and simply a politically-motivated slap at Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell. (That is, unless state Democrats possess some hidden knowledge that U.S. Sen. Christopher J. Dodd is planning on working in the Obama administration at some future point!)

And let's not forget that Rell, who has openly said she opposes the bill, is likely to veto it.

Still, giving the choice to the people certainly outweighs a gubernatorial appointment to the vacancy, no disrespect meant to the governor. The bill continues recent moves in Connecticut to open up the state's electoral processes to the people rather than the two major political parties, although lawmakers stumbled on a few other fronts in the just-concluded session (but more about that later).

Sending constitutional officer vacancies to the people as well would have strengthened arguments for this measure, but state lawmakers are not about to give up their power so quickly.

For, as it now stands, if a vacancy occurs in the offices of secretary of the state, comptroller or state treasurer, it is the General Assembly that fills the vacancy if lawmakers are in session. If not, the governor fills the vacancy subject to approval at the next Assembly session. If the attorney general's seat becomes vacant at any time, the governor makes the appointment.

Lawmakers were urged at the



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start of this session to extend the right to fill such vacancies to voters — including support for the concept by state Attorney General Richard Blumenthal — but the idea was discarded during the legislative process.

One needs only think back to the appointment in 1997 of Paul J. Silvester as state treasurer when Christopher B. Burnham resigned midway through his term to see why special election voter scrutiny might provide a safeguard. In a little less than 18 months in office as an appointee, Silvester thoroughly dishonored and discredited the state of Connecticut through kickback and money-laundering schemes that eventually landed him in prison, but not before he was voted out of office.

In addition, there are flaws in the Senate vacancy bill that, if it does become law, need to be ironed out. The measure provides for primaries to be mounted against party convention-chosen candidates, unless the vacancy occurs between the 125th day and 63rd day before a regular November state or municipal election, in which case primaries would be prohibited. And the petitioning process for parties other than the two major political parties appears fuzzy. It can give rise to the charge that, in the end, political insiders will still be making the choices with voters merely affirming them.

But, even given those flaws, the bill returns Connecticut to a system it employed to fill Senate vacancies from 1913 to 1945 and, most important, affords voters a larger say in who is to represent them in the U.S. Senate.

While the Assembly succeeded there, the same can't be said of its inaction concerning voting rights and privileges in other bills this session. Measures to permit Election Day registration withered on the vine in the Senate after being approved in House; likewise, a major bill to allow early "no-excuse" absentee voting, a process now enjoyed by voters in 28 of the 50 states. A bill to improve and better facilitate absentee voting by military personnel serving overseas made it to the House agenda but was never called for a vote.

No doubt, those measures will be back in the 2010 Assembly session, if not somehow popping up before in what could be a lengthy special session now under way to eventually enact a two-year state budget. Connecticut must continue to expand voting opportunities and privileges to its citizens, even if there are modest state and local costs involved. In the end, it makes government stronger when more citizens participate.

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A PRIVATE SOLUTION TO HEALTH REFORM

By Stephen Jewett

In the pursuit of health reform, here in Connecticut two bills await Gov. M. Jodi Rell's signature or veto; in Washington, Congress may soon decide to create a government-run health system to compete with private health plans. The lack of competition in the private insurance market is not the problem, and not causing the uninsured population and costs to rise. Our state political leaders have said little about alternative solutions like an insurance mandate that would protect Connecticut's economic core as being the "Insurance Capital of America."

Over the years, health plans have focused on cost reduction with generic drugs programs and investments in technology to run the system better. So why is your monthly premium increasing? The personal consumption of health care has exploded at a rate in which the health system cannot keep up. As a society, we have grown increasingly unhealthy: obesity alone has doubled in the last 20 years.

In response, the health system has developed more options to buy fixes for our personal health, more technology, more

drugs and more places to seek treatment. For American consumers, this rapid access to technology is what makes the private health system stand above government systems in other countries.

But despite health plans' efforts to reduce costs for our customers, we are still passing on more costs and more people are finding insurance unaffordable. We have reached this tipping point at the same time there has been a swing in public opinion from health insurance being just a consumer product to an individual right.

Thus, the call for health reform. Health plans have a host of solutions. One is to establish an individual health insurance mandate with guaranteed coverage for all citizens. Similar to car insurance, everyone will need to obtain health insurance. The concept is to fill the current gap for people who do not qualify for government plans or do not get employer-based insurance. The mandate cannot be an unreasonable burden for individuals unable to afford it, so an affordable insurance product and a government subsidy will need to be developed.

This is the most direct method to provide health coverage for all Ameri-

cans. It is also a lot less costly than trying to build a new government health plan. Massachusetts established a mandate and now has the lowest uninsured rate in the America.

Some may say we are only looking to increase our business. But in reality, if this mandate was enacted there would be little profit margin for insurers willing to take on this business and the government regulation.

With a mandate, everyone will need to contribute their fair share into the health system. For instance, 40 percent of Connecticut's uninsured population is under the age of 35 and needs minimal health services. But like Social Security, we need this age group to "pay in" something now, in order to secure the health system for their future health needs.

Not until we have everyone covered with insurance will the debate shift focus to the harder issue of containing costs. Health plans have a host of ideas to manage costs by improving the health of our state's citizens. We are looking forward to that new day and want to be part of the solution.

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