



THE VIEW

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THE 2010 LEGISLATURE: THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

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As you sit down for Christmas dinner during these days of deep economic recession, reserve a sentence or two of the blessing for the men and women of the Mississippi Legislature. Perhaps not since the dark days of the Civil Rights struggle has a group of Mississippi policymakers been faced with such a daunting array of tasks. It would be difficult enough if the problem were one of simply balancing a perilously out of balance budget. But the legislature must do so as the middle cog in the three tiered system of federal government in the United States.

As one of the many compromises necessary to bring the country into being, the nation's founding fathers divided power among the states and a central national government. By virtue of state policies, local governments came into being and subsequently the local level of government became a full partner with the national and state levels in the federal system of American government. When things are working well the argument among the three levels of government is about who gets to flex their muscles the most. But when times are tough, as they most certainly are now, there seems to be a major effort to get the adjacent level to share the load and in some cases to become the recipient of shifted responsibilities. State lawmakers have the difficult task of being the equivalent of the middle sibling in a family of three children. The national government in Washington has the advantage of raw power on its side, but if one buys what late U. S. House Speaker Tip O'Neal said about all politics being local, then it is at that level where the votes are to be found. One observer of federalism in the United States labeled the states as the fallen arches of the federal system largely because of their comparatively weaker claim to both power and grass-roots politics.

At any rate, there is certainly no shortage of crucial responsibility where the legislature or the Governor is concerned. The pressures are many and the potential impacts of decisions are enormous. A couple of examples should be illustrative of this, but first consider the context in which these examples are introduced. In November, Governor Haley Barbour brought forth his Executive Budget recommendation for Fiscal 2011. In this document he cites the

need for \$715 million in new revenue for crucial programs and a potential short fall of \$500 million in the year ending in 2012 to illustrate a claim that there will be a revenue deficiency of \$1.2 billion between now and 2012.

Two new possibilities in the previously discussed federal pipeline serve as examples of how the revenue side of the budget could be made considerably worse. First, county and municipal governments have been put on notice that there will be another concerted effort to abolish the segment of property tax on inventories at the local level. If passed, this is viewed as a major boost to business efforts to recover from the current recession. On the other hand local governments and school districts would have to compensate for the resulting loss of revenues most likely by raising property tax rates in the absence of any state dollars to replace those lost from this new exemption. Secondly, just last week, an example of action aimed at the states from the U.S. Congress streaked across the political radar screens. In a moment of euphoric discovery in the Congressional debate over comprehensive health care reform, one proposal that quickly gained steam would lower the minimum age to enter the Medicare program from 65 to 55. Many will recall that Medicaid and Medicare are provided for cooperatively by federal and state dollars.

As word of this new possibility reached key members of the Mississippi Legislature, which is already in a quandary as to how to fund the current Medicare program, there certainly was the possibility of a group faint. Governor Barbour quickly sent a letter to Senior Mississippi Senator Thad Cochran sounding the alarm that a significant sales tax and income tax increase would be unavoidable if the current Medicare rolls were expanded as described in the new health care proposal.

These are only two examples of what it is like to be legislators caught in the middle. In summary, members of the legislature face increased pressure from not only federal unfunded mandates, but potential cuts in federal programs and the certain dwindling of federal stimulus dollars. On the other hand, lawmakers will be faced with intense pressure from the voters back home that sent them to office to preserve funding for school districts and for county and municipal services and programs. This all is visited upon legislators before they even are able to consider new and innovative actions that may speed Mississippi's ascension out of the pit of recession.

Notice that any discussion of recent hyper-partisanship that has been so evident in recent legislative sessions has been avoided. There is indeed a sense that the dire situation facing the men and women of the Mississippi Legislature in January may be just the ticket to send partisan rancor to the sidelines for a season. There is an air of gravity from this legislature about the work that lies before them. They will no doubt appreciate that sentence or two tacked on to the Christmas blessing.



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