



MISSOURI SENATE

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**A Column for the Week
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Lengthy Filibuster an Interesting Lesson in Senate Discourse

JEFFERSON CITY — I have taught a number of courses at Washington University and the University of Missouri-St. Louis covering public policy and legislative procedure, but I have gained new perspective in just a few short weeks in the Missouri Senate. On Jan. 18 and into the early morning hours of Jan. 19, Senator Matt Bartle, R-Lee's Summit, stood in the Senate chamber and spoke for hours on end to hold up an otherwise routine vote on a gubernatorial appointee. I sat at my desk for 16 hours of his speech, mesmerized by the spectacle of a senator physically exhausting himself in an effort to block a vote destined to be held. Although I strongly disagreed with Senator Bartle on the substantive issue behind his action, I nevertheless enjoyed the opportunity to witness my first filibuster from the Senate floor.

At 10:30 a.m. on Jan. 18, Senator Bartle stood and addressed the Senate. He had no intention of sitting down until either he got the compromise he wanted or he was physically unable to continue. He was never able to make a deal, so he would continue speaking until 3:30 a.m. the next morning. Senator Bartle was using the filibuster to block a gubernatorial appointment to the University of Missouri Board of Curators. Warren Erdman, a Kansas City railroad executive, was appointed to the board by Governor Blunt. But because he is a strong supporter of embryonic stem cell research, which Senator Bartle staunchly opposes, his appointment hit a procedural roadblock.

During his meandering and often humorous speech, he discussed everything from his son's youth baseball team to the best stores for getting a good deal on Calvin Klein slacks. He talked about the best ways to twirl a microphone cord so as not to irritate the Senate staff, and he talked about the invasion of muskrats into the pond he dug in his backyard in Eastern Jackson County. He went through the General Assembly roster, and he said something kind about each and every member. This was no small feat.

An avid marathoner, Senator Bartle took his colleagues through an hourly series of stretches and encouraged everyone to join him. There was no clear direction to Senator Bartle's discourse, and there didn't have to be. Senator Bartle was exercising his right as a senator to engage in filibuster, the historic senatorial institution allowing lawmakers to extend debate on a bill to delay or prevent its passage. This American tradition is valued for the protection it gives to the smallest minorities against majority public opinion.

At 3:30 a.m., exhausted from standing and speaking for such a long time, and without any hope of compromise, Bartle finally sat back down, and the vote was quickly taken. Erdman was approved.

Although he was unable to block the appointment, Senator Bartle made his point to his colleagues and constituents. I strongly disagree with him on embryonic stem cells — I believe the procedure has promise to provide a number of cures for debilitating diseases — however, I support the Senate rule allowing him to defend his position. After Senator Bartle gave a passionate defense of the filibuster in a spirited exchange with other senators, I wrote to him late that night that his courage, his stamina, and his steadfast devotion to his principles made me proud to be a senator.

If all members of the General Assembly had a similar respect for legislative decorum and the rights of those with whom they disagree, the body would function more efficiently — and we could all have a little more fun.

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