



Column For Week of: April 16, 2007

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A Sad Day in the Senate

Majority Cuts Off Debate

Last Wednesday was a sad day for the Missouri Senate. For me personally, it was a day of mixed feelings. Let me back up and explain.

One special feature in both the Missouri Senate and the United States Senate is the filibuster. To filibuster a bill is to talk it to death. Filibusters preserve the rights of a minority – even a minority of one – to be heard.

A filibuster ends either when the exhausted participants capitulate and yield the floor, or when the majority employs a rare procedural tool in order to force a vote on the issue. This tool is called the “PQ” (moving the previous question), sometimes known as the "nuclear option" because when used, it tends to cause lasting acrimony for the rest of session. In order to invoke the PQ, five Senators must sign a motion, and 18 Senators must vote for the PQ. Only then may the issue go to a vote.

For 16 months Governor Blunt has pushed a plan to sell off hundreds of millions of assets held by the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority (MOHELA). The Governor’s plan, handled in the Senate by Gary Nodler (R-Joplin), was continually revised in an attempt to muster a majority, but some senators remained unalterably opposed to the plan. Senators Graham (D-Columbia), Bray (D-University City), and Justus (D-Kansas City) fought valiantly against the plan, filibustering into the wee hours of the morning.

I personally opposed the plan for two main reasons. First, all life sciences projects were removed from the bill to appease Missouri Right to Life. If Missouri is to become the biotechnology hub that we aspire to be, we must protect a scientist’s right to research. Second, given recent congressional action lowering student loan interest rates that could profoundly affect rates in Missouri, it does not seem to be the appropriate time to tamper with the successful MOHELA program, potentially increasing interest rates for low-income students and threatening their access to higher education.

Early Thursday morning, the Republican majority decided to invoke the PQ to cut off floor debate. Honoring the right of individual Senators to speak without constraint, every Democrat opposed the PQ motion. The Republican majority's breach of Senate tradition made it a sad day for the institution.

Personally, I had mixed feelings about the result, because I was able to amend the bill significantly. First, I was able to include my proposal to create the Missouri Teaching Fellows program, which offers tuition loan forgiveness to the top 10% of Missouri college freshman who agree to remain in Missouri for college and then teach in unaccredited school districts, such as the St. Louis public schools. Second, working with Senators Rupp (R-St. Charles) and Crowell (R-Cape Girardeau), I was able to expand the state's Bright Flight scholarship program, which keeps the state's best and brightest high school seniors here in Missouri. Because of my amendment, Bright Flight will reach nearly twice as many students, and the scholarship award to half of them will double.

In addition to the benefits that will accrue to thousands of Missouri students, I learned a great deal in the process, since I was forced to draft several amendments on the fly as I offered them. I can tell you that in my political career, I've never felt quite as much pressure as I did standing out there on the Senate floor scribbling on a note pad, trying to get the language right while the chamber waited patiently, knowing that it may become the law of the State. It is truly a humbling feeling.

During my last campaign, I strongly supported many policies and strongly opposed many others. Usually, things seemed simple. But things in the Senate – as in life – are rarely black and white. For me, last week was colored in shades of gray.

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