

LACKLUSTER LEGISLATURE

With important issues left unaddressed, Perry must call for a special session

On June 2, the 140-day odyssey of the 78th Texas Legislature came to an end. The session was full of drama, with hot-button issues such as tuition deregulation, lawsuit reform and the shadow cast by the state budget shortfall. But all of this was overshadowed by the dramatic flight of House Democrats over redistricting. Still, this year's Legislature did pass significant legislation, some good and some bad. As far as House Speaker Tom Craddick is concerned, "We accomplished everything we wanted to," according to the June 3 issue of The Bryan-College Station Eagle. But if that is the case, legislators must not have wanted to deal with other important issues, such as public school financing. The troubling status quo necessitates the calling of a special session to try to solve the remaining problems.

The state needs meaningful solutions for issues that were unsolved at the end of the past session. Biggest among these is the problem of school funding. During the last session, legislation was passed that provided for the phasing out of the "Robin Hood" plan for school funding. The "Robin Hood" plan involved taking tax revenues and redistributing them to poorer ones. Although Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst proposed an alternative plan based on a new tax structure, it was not successfully passed in the regular session.

Another bill that failed to pass would have required high school students in the top 10 percent of their classes who wished to go to a state university to have taken a minimum curriculum recommended by the state.

A bill designed to make the state government more efficient also failed, although Sen. Rodney Ellis, D-Houston, told The Eagle that all of the important money-saving features of the bill had been added to other bills. Last but not least among important bills killed was the congressional redistricting measure. All of these issues are key to the state, its economy and its smooth operation, yet none were adequately addressed.

The current state of affairs demands the rapid convening of a special session primarily concerned with the problem of public school funding, and secondly, devoted to solving the other issues. But almost two weeks after the end of the regular session, Gov. Rick Perry has not set a date for a special session or sessions for these neglected issues.

In a column from The Fort Worth Star Telegram, Republican legislators were quoted by The Houston Chronicle as saying that the governor is considering a special session. But The Chronicle reported that it seems the session will focus on redistricting and government reform



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legislation, not school funding. School funding would be addressed at a later time, perhaps next fall.

Some sources point to the fact that Perry is planning a special session, just maybe not about school finance.

According to The Chronicle, the governor's office has "advised (lawmakers) against making vacation plans." While this would seem to be a positive sign, it may hurt the state if Perry takes too long to call a special session or lets redistricting drive the agenda if he does call it.

The biggest reason Perry might call a special session is because there is also a pending lawsuit against the state filed by several school districts. According to The Chronicle, the suit, which had been dismissed by a lower court, was sent back by the Texas Supreme Court for further consideration. This should scare legislators because a judge originally created the "Robin Hood" plan through a court case. If legislators wait too long in deciding what to do, the state court system might decide things for them again.

Although redistricting, reforms to the state government and the top 10 percent plan are compelling distractions, Perry must exercise more leadership than he did during the regular session and push to solve the school funding problem first.

An additional benefit of doing that would be that most ideas for reform of school funding include some kind of redesign of the state tax structure, like Lt. Gov. Dewhurst's plan, which involved raising the sales tax and lowering state property tax caps. This would help local governments that are already suffering from loss of funds due to the state's budget shortfall.

The past session was a productive and dramatic one for the state government, but it failed to solve some of the state's problems. Now is the time for Perry to step up and lead the legislature in fixing what it left behind, especially school funding, before others do it for them in ways they may not like.

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Graphic by Ivan Flores.



Bush administration hasn't found WMD

CIA's findings were ambiguous; materials not necessarily used for weapons

Lately, much ado has been made about two trailers found in northern Iraq. In a recently released report, available at www.cia.gov, the CIA



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declared them to be "mobile biological-weapon production plants." The dossier of materials itself is considered so important that the Bush administration made it available to the American public.

The account observes that the trailers contain a water-chiller, an air compressor, water-supply tanks, a fermenter and a device for collecting exhaust gases. So attractive was the combination of all these components in one mobile place, that the CIA labeled it an "ingeniously simple, self-contained bioprocessing system." The trailers are similar to descriptions of mobile bioweapon-producing labs given by various Iraqi exiles. Thus, they closely resemble the drawings of such labs, which were based on these descriptions, shown by Secretary of State Colin Powell to the U.N. Security Council in his famous presentation

months ago. The highlight of the document is the statement that claims the trailers to be "the strongest evidence to date that Iraq was hiding a biological-warfare program." The "evidence," however, is not strong and is far from conclusive. The case against the trucks, as presented by the CIA's report, relies on eliminating all other possible uses for the trailers, a poor way to substantiate any claim.

There is still no evidence that the labs were used recently, or, in fact, ever at all. The report admits that U.S. officials have found no traces of any bio-weapon agents inside the trailers. The document states, "We suspect that the Iraqis thoroughly decontaminated the vehicle to remove evidence." This is possible, though unlikely. If the Iraqis were that worried about the trailers and had enough time to painstakingly do away with every trace of biological agents in them, then they would have destroyed the trucks as well. There is no purpose in removing

every grain of explosive from a bomb, but leaving the bombshell intact.

The file also mentions that each trailer would have to be supplemented by one or two more trailers, each of a different type, to produce biological weapons. These trailers would have to be specifically made to process the bacteria. Thus, they would need to be equipped with mixing tanks, centrifuges and spray dryers; all items not present in the two trailers that were discovered. The CIA does recognize that these other trailers still need to be found. Yet, the possibility that these missing trucks do not exist is not even considered.

Iraqi officials maintain that the trailers were used to produce hydrogen for artillery weather balloons, which are used by an army to measure the accuracy of artillery fire. The report acknowledges that some of the trailer equipment, namely the gas collection system and the presence of caustic substances, are consistent with hydrogen production. Yet, the report refutes this scenario because such a use for the labs

would be inefficient — the trailers found have a larger capacity than systems normally used to produce hydrogen gas.

In similar fashion, the CIA document rejects the chance that the trailers could have been used to manufacture biopesticides.

Biological weapon and biopesticide production requires the same techniques and equipment. However, this explanation is invalidated because the size of the equipment is unnecessary for biopesticide production and because the manufacture of biopesticides would be more economically achieved at a bigger, fixed facility.

Just because the trailers operate less efficiently when used for these alternate purposes does not mean they were not employed for these purposes. Besides, the trailers are by no means 100 percent efficient when used to produce biological agents.

A recent story in The New York Times said the mobile labs were "poorly designed." This is because Iraqi lab workers would find it very difficult to place the necessary raw

materials into the system, and would then have more trouble when they would attempt to remove the amplified batch of the biological agent. If it is difficult to put a material into the contraption and just as hard to get it out, it does not matter how well the rest of system works.

This is why the logical method used by the agency to validate the trailers as mobile bio-labs is incorrect — a case against the function of the trailers as biological weapon producers can be made as well. Of course, given the desperation of the current administration to find weapons of mass destruction, maybe this report, especially its "strongest evidence to date" statement, is understandable. It may be the strongest evidence to date, but not because the evidence is itself substantial. Rather, in the context in which the trailers are seen, that is, a lack of any evidence at all, the "mobile bio-weapon producing labs" scenario looks much better than warranted.

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MAIL CALL

Moral crusader Bill Bennett's gambling not a case of hypocrisy

In response to George Deutsch's June 9 column:

I'm sorry. I didn't realize that Jon Stewart is a reputable source of political commentary. Letterman is much more insightful, don't you think? With two quotes from Stewart and a handful of incorrect facts, it appears George Deutsch may have done all of his research for his June 9 article via late night television.

Here are just a few items among many in need of correction:

Bennett never lied about his gambling habits, nor has he tried to hide it as Mr. Deutsch alleges. When asked about it, Bennett said, "I play fairly high stakes. But I don't bet the milk money. I don't put my family at risk. And I don't owe anybody anything." Is it not true that a multi-millionaire can afford to lose more in Las Vegas than say, a college student?

Secondly, Empower America does not oppose legalized gambling. The only references to gambling found on the organization's Web site are four gambling-related facts included in a list of pop culture statistics that also contain information about movies and television. Does this mean Bennett "opposes" those, too?

Finally, a comparison to Clinton is unjustified. Not only has Bennett not committed perjury, but sex and gambling are two different things. As was recently pointed out by columnist Jonah Goldberg, local communities don't post billboards shouting "Live Your Dreams: Boink the Interns!"

Bill Bennett has certainly gambled too much, and I'm not claiming anything otherwise. But to say this is a case of hypocrisy is grossly exaggerated. Nothing in this whole mess of accusations makes Bennett's stance on moral issues any less accurate. Unlike the political satire seen on The Daily Show, Mr. Deutsch's effort to discredit Bill Bennett is far from funny.

Walt Curtis
Class of 2001

