

From the *Tallahassee Democrat*

## A day of buzzwords, cuts and a bit of unity

Mary Ann Lindley • Editorial Page Editor • March 3, 2010

The women in the House of Representatives all wore red suits on opening day of the 112th regular session of the Florida Legislature. It was a show of solidarity between Democrats and Republicans — power suits reminiscent of the '80s, red, the color of getting noticed (unless *everyone's* wearing red, perhaps?), an homage to Nancy Reagan.

The Legislature is, in fact, reverentially kind of stuck in the 1980s, one longtime lobbyist observed, not unkindly. "Ronald Reagan did a lot of good," he said, but his legend and mantra of government-as-the-enemy, and by definition always too fat and bossy, rules the day in 2010.

Opening Day usually has a fine energy about it, but this year it felt far more subdued. Yet when you speak with individual members, they are — so far, the session is young — amiable and respectful of one another and the process itself.

The Democrat and Republican women, for instance, have few common philosophical bonds, but their red suits were a show of willing friendship, of debts paid from last session, or a chit that one might want to collect on this year when a particular vote comes up.

Relationships do make a big difference in public policy, just as vibrant personalities sway us voters. It pays to be courteous and smile, to keep channels of communication open between and among members, lobbyists, staff — and spouses, too.

Insiders speculate that an array of bills banning texting while driving, for example, won't fly because if there's one thing the leadership likes less than enlarging government it's telling people what to do or what not to do: regulating.

Yet the word is that the speaker's wife is all in favor of a ban on texting, so let's see where that one goes.

Opening day exists in a kind of haze — clouds of tired, unimaginative terminology and buzzwords float over the rotunda, drifting out of the chambers.

Speaker Larry Cretul's speech to inspire and direct his players was loaded with "efficiency," "accountability," "oversight," "streamline," "consolidate," "cost-savings."

The House earlier sent out a directive to all state agencies, including the universities, to find 15 percent in their budgets that they don't really need — waste, wretched excess — and then to "prioritize," another buzzword, what's left.

Few believe that, in the end, there will be a 15-percent reduction across the board, but rotunda scuttlebutt is that if you're asked to cut 15 percent and you end up being cut just 10 percent, then everybody wins and you are expected to show your appreciation. You just lost one arm, not both arms and part of your nose.

In President Jeff Atwater's Senate, the theme is "faster, better, cheaper," and he has even gone to the trouble of creating a Senate Budget Office, something never done in the state. It's patterned after the Congressional Budget Office, which sizes up all spending and is the wizard playing with the lights behind the curtains.

Though not many are counting out Gov. Charlie Crist, not really — he has line-item veto power over the budget, and that's huge — the shadow of former Gov. Jeb Bush looms. Whether he is terribly involved in statehouse politics now is doubtful; he's got bigger fish to fry with his man, Rubio, trying to get elected.

But the Bush mystique was in fact enhanced last month when Atwater hired Bush's former budget director, Donna Arduin, to head his SBO on a consulting contract that was advertised as paying between \$70,000 and \$175,000. So Bush econometrics are making an encore with Arduin, back from what had to be a frustrating stint with California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, recreating her character as a cool-hand, cost-cutting machine. Finding "redundancies" is what she and her firm are to be looking for.

But what does it all mean? Are these just opening-day and election-year words and nothing more — rhetoric that everyone is too timid to contradict?

After two decades of lawmakers declaring that they will be the ones to make government leaner, meaner, more efficient, smaller and yet somehow much better, one has to wonder if Florida hasn't already cut through the bone and is now into the marrow — and will need a transfusion eventually to thrive.

Florida State University lobbyist Kathleen Daly pointed out that FSU, for example, is nationally acclaimed for offering one of the most cost-effective, high-quality university educations in the 50 states — oh, and it's also getting national notice for now firing tenured faculty to keep its numbers lean. Yet it's still expected to find another 15 percent of waste and excess.

I don't look for anyone to break the spell this session, to find ways to invest in our state instead of perpetuating the notion that we can starve our way to prosperity.

No doubt the spell is too powerful to be broken by any single state; the party divide and the fear of bucking all-powerful party dogma is so pervasive even as, little by little, voters are beginning to realize they're not fond of either party's rigid lockstep and simplistic solutions to complex troubles.

Even legislators who know a great deal about what they're doing, who possess real insight into what would make Florida a more enchanting, competitive, humane, creative state, just can't quite buck the suffocating system that we have in place.

The red suits are so cheerful. But they are dated parody of power, an illusion in a state where there is little left to lose.

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