Somebody needs to check Pennsylvania’s water supply. Perhaps it’s something those guys are drinking, or maybe smoking, that explains the faux pas outbreak spreading in the Keystone State. Either way, it’s threatening to become a serious epidemic.

First, Attorney General Tom Corbett, considered by many experts to be governor-in-waiting, recorded one of the truly boneheaded moments of the political season by trying to subpoena Twitter records in a legal showdown with a convicted Bonusgate defendant. This well-aimed shot to his own foot needlessly portrayed him as an enemy of the First Amendment.

Then, for an encore, he opined in an interview to a public radio reporter that Pennsylvania’s unemployed just weren’t looking for jobs hard enough because their juicy unemployment benefits kept them fat and happy.

These two gems, you might imagine, didn’t make anyone very happy. An embarrassed and uncharacteristically quiet Corbett quickly beat a strategic retreat, presumably seeking treatment for the foot-in-mouth disease he had recently contracted.

Almost on cue, Corbett’s backtrack came barely in time for incumbent Governor Ed Rendell to take center stage with a dazzling display of his own verbal maladroitness.

Rendell, always the consummate politician, is apparently concerned about keeping a bipartisan balance in Harrisburg. The governor doesn’t want anyone to think that only Republicans have dumb and dangerous ideas to proffer. Indeed, Democrats can hold their own in that category very well.

And here’s the proof if you doubt it. Rendell would like to mount cameras along highways to photograph license plates and compare the numbers against a database that would verify whether the driver has insurance. In short, he proposes that the state should monitor with cameras every driver out on Pennsylvania’s roads in case they’re doing something nefarious.

Not, you will note, because drivers have done something wrong or because there is a reasonable suspicion of wrong doing, but just in case. Is there an extra copy of George Orwell’s 1984 for the governor to peruse? Or maybe just a copy of the Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution would do. You will be relieved to know that strictly speaking Rendell’s plan is not a law enforcement proposal designed to get dangerous or financially irresponsible drivers off the roads. Allegedly Penn Dot and the state police are doing that already.

Instead, Rendell’s modern-day version of Candid Camera is really aimed at getting more money into the state’s fast dwindling treasury coffers. Who can blame him for good intentions? As Rendell winds up his final term, the state is, shall we say, financially embarrassed. It presently faces a $5 billion structural deficit and is flat broke by any benchmark you care to apply.
Now, Rendell is smart enough not to try to sell his camera scheme as law enforcement since everyone (over six years old, at least) knows that the state does almost nothing to enforce an insurance law already on the books for more than two decades. But he is naive enough to think he can get any serious money out of uninsured drivers who mostly are uninsured because they can’t afford insurance. This is the level of intellectual effort going on at the highest level of state government, circa 2010.

Rendell’s camera-in-every-lamppost proposition is so far his only recent entry in the I-can’t-believe-I-said-that category. Technically Tom Corbett’s still ahead. But stay tuned; these guys are very competitive. The campaigns still have many weeks to go, and the governor’s term doesn’t end until January 20. It’s still early.

What can we say about any of these not-quite-ready-for-prime-time doozies from the state’s top two officials? Rendell’s camera idea seems just plain frenzied. The state’s fiscal situation might be desperate, but the state’s governor doesn’t have to be.

As for Corbett’s blunders, maybe the less said the better. He’s likely sorry for them, and everyone else is too.

But Rendell and Corbett have added further evidence, as if we needed it, that many politicians are falling more and more out of touch with average citizens. Even as Corbett seeks the governorship, his missteps are ominously bookended by Rendell’s late-term struggles. Yet both represent, by any measure, Pennsylvania’s best and brightest. None of this augurs well for a state facing its greatest governing challenges since the Great Depression. Get ready—the fun might just be starting.

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