By convicting former number two-Democrat and house leader Mike Veon of 14 Bonusgate related charges, a Dauphin County jury has confirmed Harrisburg's worst kept secret: for decades legislative employees, using public resources and paid with public monies, regularly, systematically, and brazenly spent part or all of their workdays on political campaigns. Indeed, some of them were hired to do just that. In Harrisburg the public's business has been the private business of a clique of powerful legislators willing to do whatever it takes to sustain their personal power while taxpayers pick up the bill.

But what now?

1. What can be done to prevent future such abuses of public trust?
2. How can legislators be prevented from dragooning public employees to work in their own campaigns?
3. What should be done to prevent state legislators from looting the public treasury to finance their own re-election campaigns?

These are not issues that will fade away with one case or one verdict. And if you think a few, or even a few dozen, convictions will stop inventive malefactors from finding new and creative ways to bilk the public treasury, think again. The systematic impressments of legislative staff and the pillaging of public dough to run private campaigns is an ancient scam in state politics-a fraud with more variations than we have legislators.

Sending people to jail isn't going to stop it, editorializing passionately about honest government isn't going to stop it, more crusading prosecutors aren't going to stop it, and wishing it so isn't going to stop it.

But there is something that will stop it-stop it fast, stop it cold, and stop it permanently. And that something is a state Hatch Act, modeled after the federal legislation of that name.

The Hatch Act passed in 1939 and was named after Senator Carl Hatch (New Mexico), who introduced the federal legislation. It was formally designated as An Act to Prevent Pernicious Political Activities, ironically foreshadowing the very pernicious political activities that would evolve in the Pennsylvania legislature.

The original Act was designed to prohibit federal employees from engaging in partisan political activity. Later it was extended to thousands of state employees, mostly in executive branches whose programs use federal monies in their programs.

But what's good for the goose might be even better for the gander. Why not a state legislative version of the Hatch Act? A little Hatch Act, if you will, that would apply to legislative staffers. Certainly "preventing pernicious political activities" is what we want to do, particularly in the legislative branch where workers have no civil service or union protection.
They are at-will employees mostly, meaning they get hired and fired by legislators-legislators very interested in getting re-elected and legislators that are very good at finding ways to accomplish that. In fact, until recently Pennsylvania had incumbency re-election rates of more than 95 percent.

And Bonusgate is exactly about that problem: using staff and other public resources to get re-elected. The problem is cash. The demand for campaign resources is almost inexhaustible in modern times, and hijacking at-will staff paid with public monies presents an irresistible temptation for hard pressed legislators running political campaigns.

James Madison described it best long ago in Federalist No. 51: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary." But men are not angels, as our politicians remind us again and again.

And so lacking both meaningful reform and angelic politicians, the abuses uncovered in Bonusgate will continue long after the last trial, long after the last prosecutor goes home, and long after the last legislator goes to jail. They will continue because under current law state legislators are like kids in a candy store-with no one behind the counter to make them leave the candy alone.

A little Hatch Act will put someone behind that counter, guaranteeing that the ancient abusive practices toward staff are ended. And it will do more. It will ensure that legislative staff are employed because of competence and ability, encouraged to learn and perfect the many technical competencies demanded of government workers, without fear that campaigning is expected for the next raise or the next promotion.

Some exceptions will likely have to be carved out to account for the differences between state and federal government. But even with such exceptions, Pennsylvania has much to gain and little to lose by 'hatching' legislative staff.

Doing so would be a giant step toward leaving behind the near paralysis that has afflicted the general assembly for two years. And it would help send a clear and unequivocal message that the business of politics is no longer business as usual in the Pennsylvania legislature.

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