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Chinks in Beebe's armor

Sunday, Apr 1, 2007

By John Brummett

This near universal extolling of Mike Beebe's mastery of the governor's office had gotten to me. Give me a break. The guy puts on his pants one leg at a time.

To bring Beebe to earth, I pondered payday lending and animal cruelty.

Governors are not obliged to take positions on every bill that gets filed, much less expend political capital and mobilize resources. That's especially so considering that several hundred of our bills tend to be screwball, unworthy of a governor's or anybody else's attention. But popular governors can choose to make important differences.

First, it appeared that Beebe had folded his hands on predatory lending practices by which cash-advancing outlets extend poor people a little money between paychecks. They do so for usurious chunks of paychecks to come - and likely again and again, permanently discounting the poor man's wages by helping themselves to a recurring portion.

I wondered about Beebe's neutrality and whether it had anything to do with his like-a-brother relationship with freelance lobbyist Don Tilton, who represents payday lenders.

Second, it appeared that, in part because of Beebe's detachment, Arkansas will remain peculiar among states in that there will continue to be nothing a person could do to your dog or cat that the state would care enough about to make a felony. Shoot it, microwave it, barbecue it, excise its head and send it to you in a box. No matter. Forgive the brutal imagery. Arkansas needs to hear what it doesn't care about.

The animal cruelty felony bill failed because the Farm Bureau reared up. Good ol' boys professed to fear that they might be seen shoo-ing a stray dog and that some overzealous prosecuting attorney would send them to the big house.

Beebe could have called the Farm Bureau and asked it, or told it, to stand down. If the Farm Bureau had balked, he could have leaned on House Speaker Benny Petrus, his partner in maneuvering, to send the bill somewhere other than the Agriculture Committee, a nonsensical assignment by which the bill was effectively killed. Then Beebe could have worked that other committee. But he did none of that.

There are two issues. One is that Beebe didn't do what a lone columnist wanted him to do. The other is that he did nothing at all.

Here's the response from the governor's press office.

Beebe did, in fact, take a position on payday lending - behind the scenes. As the story goes, Beebe personally went to more than one member of the Senate Insurance and Commerce Committee to seek support for the substantive House bill to hold payday lenders to the usury ceiling and fine them if they violated it.

Apparently, Beebe's pal Tilton had more pull with Sens. Bob Johnson, Percy Malone, Paul Miller, Jack Critcher, Terry Smith, Barbara Horn and Paul Bookout.

Imagine two friends. One becomes governor and the other a hired-gun lobbyist. The hired-gun lobbyist turns out to be more powerful.

Beebe's press aide tells me the governor would have signed the meaningful House bill restricting payday lenders, now killed in that Senate committee, but hasn't decided whether he will sign the window-dressing alternative cooked up self-servingly by Tilton's payday lenders.

The press aide said Beebe doesn't shy from a longtime friendship with Tilton, but "vehemently" objects to any suggestion he would ever let that conflict with his governing.

As for animal cruelty, the press aide said Beebe would sign either the first-time felony bill or the diversion offered by the Farm Bureau making a felony of a second offense within five years. But the press aide said the governor had not engaged in the debate. He had other fish to fry and other cats to skin. He had no dog in that hunt.

All of that is to say that the monument we build to Beebe ought to bear a couple of footnotes about poor folks and animals.

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