

Justices squander public's faith

If you take a broad view, the reported travel and telephone transgressions of some members of the State Supreme Court border on the trivial. For instance, some of them like to drive big, expensive gas-guzzling cars that cost more to run than the state's normal reimbursement rate, and see nothing wrong with using a little clout to get themselves reimbursed at a higher rate. So what? Some like to stay in fancy hotels and think taxpayers should pick up the tab, but the total amount of money involved isn't more than a few hundred dollars at best. Big deal. Some "forget" the rule about reimbursing the state for personal phone calls made on the state's nickel — but again, we're talking at the most a few hundred bucks, so where's the beef?

It's right here: Once again, the arrogance of a few threatens the image of all the justices and their many colleagues on the state's appellate and circuit courts. And once again, the arrogance of a few sets a bad example for thousands of less exalted state employees and undermines state efforts to cut wasteful spending. And once again, the arrogance of a few casts doubt on the Supreme Court's ability to police itself, let alone the entire state court system.

OUR OPINION



Bahlitch

The two worst offenders are Justices William Bahlitch and Louis Ceci, whose free-wheeling interpretations of what the state should pay for are in sharp contrast to those of their frugal colleagues Shirley Abrahamson and Roland Day. Adding insult to injury were the responses of Bahlitch and Ceci to a reporter's questions: Ceci refused to answer, hiding behind a ludicrous claim that the reporter is biased against Italian-Americans; Bahlitch tried to justify his expenditures — including long-distance calls to taxidermists and wine merchants — with the equally lame claim that everything was "business-related."

Sadly, momentary embarrassment of the justices is probably all the public can expect, for any real reforms are extremely unlikely. After all, the job of policing the justices falls to the state Judicial Commission, four of whose nine members are



Ceci

appointed by — guess who? — the state Supreme Court. As for self-regulation, if Bahlitch can't see how his phone conversations with legislators and other politicians might stretch the judicial ethics code prohibition of political activity, the public can have little hope the justices will see lesser streaks and fly specks on the windows of their glass courthouse.

It all boils down to a question of power — and its petty trappings — which a few of the justices appear loathe to relinquish. Remember, for instance, last spring, when a committee appointed by the court itself recommended the Supremes turn over their administrative duties to a Judicial Board? That proposal so far has done a better disappearing act than Judge Crater — as will the current furor over expense accounts and phone bills. It's too bad, from the court's point of view, the nagging question of who is judging the judges won't disappear as well.

Long view: Thompson flying high

Trying to measure the popularity of a politician is an inexact science — sort of like grinding lenses for space telescopes. What goes up can break down.

Gov. Tommy Thompson's orbiting approval ratings are no exception to that rule. What seems like an insignificant flaw one day can be a mission-scrubbing malfunction the next. But with 3½ months to go before Wisconsin's general election, Thompson's popularity gauges all read "go." Only the best efforts of Democratic challenger Tom Loftus will bring the high-flying Thompson back to Earth.

The news of late for Thompson has been good. On Wednesday, he was endorsed by the mayors of 19 Wisconsin cities, bringing to 40 the total of mayoral blessings so far. About 450 local officials statewide have hitched their star to Thompson in recent months, including a dozen or so Democrats.



THOMAS W. STILL

Democratic mayors who have urged Thompson's re-election are from Kenosha, Portage, Racine, Chippewa Falls, Oconomowoc and Menasha, cities that aren't known as Republican strongholds. Even Madison Mayor Paul Soglin recently tipped his hat to the Capitol when he remarked that new state aids will help him keep property taxes down. That's hardly an endorsement, but it's not an election-year jab, either.

On Thursday, Thompson's latest campaign-finance report showed that his support comes in all denominations. Not only has he hauled in \$5,000 checks from political-action committees, but Thompson is getting plenty of \$5, \$10 and \$20 donations from people who don't open their wallets because they have to give, but because they want to give.

According to Thompson's most recent six-month report, 84.6 percent of his contributors are individuals. The list of contributors runs 1,161 pages long. Of the 5,048 contributions this year, 3,211 (64 percent) are from people who gave \$50 or less.

Earlier this month, a survey of 561 people by WISN-TV political analyst Wayne Youngquist at Milwaukee's Summerfest showed that 40 percent of those polled would vote for Thompson, 20 percent for Loftus and 39 percent were undecided. Conventional wisdom says Loftus needs to win Milwaukee handsily in order to overcome Thompson's outside edge; polls such as the WISN survey must come as discouraging snapshots in time for upset-minded Democrats.

Loftus also needs to do well in Dane County, another Democratic stronghold. Four years ago, then-Gov. Anthony Earl defeated Thompson by a 60-40 margin in what was regarded as Earl's "home" county. Sun Prairie native Loftus needs to at least match those numbers in November, and informal questionnaires by Dane County legislators (all Democrats) show that's possible. Republican polls reportedly have shown Thompson with a higher approval rating in Dane County than Loftus, however.

Polls, campaign donor lists and endorsements are three ways of measuring support for a candidate, but even collectively, they're far from reliable. What public-opinion poll in 1986 showed Attorney General Bronson La Follette losing to Don Hanaway? Campaign donations can be as much a reflection of organizational strength as they are popular appeal, and it's no secret that Thompson and the state GOP are well organized.

As for endorsements by public officials, they're politicians, too. Thompson's campaign staff is trying to fill up the bandwagon early in hopes of making stragglers feel like they're being left behind. If you're a small-town mayor and the sitting governor asks to use your name, phrases like "state aid payments" run through your head.

Caveats aside, it appears that Thompson is as well-liked as any sitting governor could hope to be. Whether that changes in the coming months depends on intangibles such as campaign bloopers, unforeseen scandals and events beyond the control of anyone in Wisconsin. Mostly, however, it depends on the ability of Loftus to sell himself as more in touch with the average voter.

That's a tough order with an election 16 weeks away, but who knows? Maybe NASA will find a way to fix the Hubble telescope, too.

Still is associate editor of *The State Journal* and a former political reporter.

WISCONSIN VIEWS

No amendment; no loss

Every now and then someone tells the truth about what goes on in Washington. Congressman James Traficant did that twice (last week) during debate prior to rejection of the Balanced Budget Amendment.

First, the Ohio Democrat said, "This country doesn't need a constitutional amendment, it needs a Congress with guts." Second, he said, "People are going to vote for the constitutional amendment and go home and beat their chests and say, 'Look what I've done for you.' The fact is, they've done nothing."

The congressman is right on both of those counts. Members of Congress can produce a balanced budget by dealing honestly with the nation's needs and resources. They only have to say no to some spending, increase taxes selectively — or more realistically, do a bit of both. . . . Rather than mourn the amendment's demise, demand that members of Congress, and of the administration, deal realistically with budget problems.

— Green Bay Press-Gazette

Pesticide bans too costly to take lightly

The American Farm Bureau last week released a poll that showed that one in five Americans would like to ban pesticides. So what would the world be like if they got their wish?

Hungrier, for starters. The world's ability to feed billions of people is in large part due to man's ability to protect crops from insects. Throughout recorded history, crop-destroying pestilence has plagued mankind. Pesticides assure man that most crops survive the ravages of insects and wind up on the table, where they belong.

"Without deliberate human intervention, nature rapidly would eradicate the world's food-producing capacity," writes Elizabeth Whelan, president of the American Council on Science and Health. "Calls for limits or the banning of pesticides, based on unsubstantiated fear of a one-in-a-billion chance of contracting cancer, would threaten millions of people by reducing their food supplies." Most of those millions live in developing nations where food shortages already sow misery and death.

The developed world also would be a more expensive place to eat. Without pesticides, food costs would rise sharply because farmers would lose a much higher percentage of their crop to insect damage. And some types of fruits and vegetables would be harder to come by at any price.

Perhaps most telling for the Fearful One-Fifth Society, bans on pesticides wouldn't make our food measurably safer.

Yes, pesticides are poisons. But American consumers are exposed to pesticides in minuscule amounts. Allowable tolerance levels for pesticide residues in food are set by the Environmental Protection Agency up to 100 times more than necessary to protect health. The federal Food and Drug Administration inspects foods to make sure those "tolerance levels" are respected.

Even if pesticides were banned in an attempt to assure absolute safety, foods would continue to abound in natural toxins.

A recent story in *Science* magazine explained that 99.99 percent of the pesticides we eat are produced naturally. These naturally occurring pesticides are fairly new to the modern diet because of the exchange of plant foods among the Americas, Asia, Europe and Africa within the past 1,000 years.

Just about every fruit or vegetable in the supermarket contains natural carcinogens. According to *Science*, the following foods contain

natural pesticides that cause cancer in mice: anise, apples, bananas, basil, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cantaloupe . . . well, you don't need the whole bowl of alphabet soup to get the flavor.

Public nerves about pesticides were frayed a year ago by the use on apples of Alar, a chemical some studies suggested could cause cancer in humans. Well, that was true . . . but a human would need to drink 500 gallons of apple juice per day for 70 years in order to get the same level of Alar residue consumed by laboratory mice.

All pesticides and other farm chemicals such as weed killers and fertilizers deserve close monitoring, and there may be some chemicals that should be banned. For example, Wisconsin's agriculture department last week proposed a ban on most uses of atrazine in Dane, Rock, Columbia, Grant, Iowa, Lafayette, Sauk, St. Croix and Walworth counties in response to reports of ground-water contamination.

But the long-range answers include federal ground-water regulations (Wisconsin already has a tough ground-water law) and more breakthroughs in genetic engineering. If more plants can be genetically altered to withstand pests and disease, the need for chemicals would decline.

Consumers and farmers alike are right to be concerned about excessive pesticide use, but a ban on all chemicals, regardless of their safety? That's a foolhardy step that would hurt everyone.

WISCONSIN STATE JOURNAL

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A chip off the ol' Bush?



Blacks shift hope to school 'choice'

WASHINGTON — You're going to be hearing more and more about "choice" in education during the next months and years. And not just from the political conservatives who have been pushing vouchers and tuition tax credits for the past decade and longer.

The new choice advocates, whose voices are changing the climate of the education debate, are not the conservative ideologues but ordinary men and women — often black and poor — who have given up on an educational system they are convinced has given up on their children.

They are people such as Polly Williams, the Wisconsin state legislator who has pushed through a voucher plan under which, starting this fall, 1,000 Milwaukee youngsters can attend any private non-sectarian school of their choice, with the state paying up to \$2,500 in tuition costs; or Lawrence Patrick, the Detroit school board president who is pushing a plan to combine Milwaukee-like choice with Chicago-like community control of public schools.

Williams and Patrick are black, and it matters. As long as white conservatives were the driving force behind vouchers,

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tax credits and other choice mechanisms, the mostly liberal education establishment found it easy to discredit them as not really interested in the education of poor children but only in their own arcane doctrines.

No such charge can stick against Williams, an inner-city single mother who twice headed the Rev. Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign in Wisconsin. Her interest, she insists, is not in undermining public schools but in educating poor black children. They aren't being educated now, she says, because the school hierarchy has been more interested in perpetuating its own power and in promoting racial integration. Like Patrick, her goal is not to empty the public schools but to force them to improve.

Choice, of course, embraces far more than tuition payments and community control. Indeed, it may be misleading to subsume under the single heading of "choice" the myriad plans that are either being developed or are already in place in efforts to make the public schools better.

In Chicago, choice means neighborhood school boards, complete with the power to hire and fire teachers and principals, as a means of freeing local schools from the stultifying distance and detachment of "downtown." In Minnesota, it means giving parents the right to send their children to any public school, even across district lines. In New York, it means freeing parents to design education programs for their children. In East Harlem, huge schools have been transformed into a

series of smaller ones which, while housed in a common building, use distinctive approaches to organization and teaching.

The fascinating thing about all of these schemes is how little they are involved with race. For a full generation after the 1954 Supreme Court desegregation decision, the civil-rights establishment has focused on racial integration. The theory has been that the best way to give black children an equal education is to get them into the same classrooms as white children.

It has worked reasonably well in smaller school districts where, for instance, two segregated and underfunded high schools could merge into one. It has not worked well in the larger cities, where racial housing patterns have made integration achievable only by wide-scale busing and, more recently, magnet schools designed to attract white students.

It is true that magnet schools generally have been both superior and integrated. But it is also true that the educational needs of the majority of black children have been sacrificed to the effort to attract white children.

As Williams put it, Milwaukee's desegregation plan principally benefited whites drawn to the magnet schools and black students who were either lucky enough to be included or whose parents were willing to "put their babies on the bus at 5:30 in the morning and not see them again until 6:30 in the evening."

She wants better opportunities for all children. But despite her success in the state Legislature, her battle for choice is

far from over. A lawsuit against the plan, filed by a coalition including teachers, administrators and the president of the Milwaukee branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is now before the Wisconsin courts.

While it speaks of uniformity and standards and authority, the suit is virtually silent on the question of instructional quality. As Elizabeth Kristol, of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, noted in the *Washington Post* (Op-Ed, June 22):

"Not once in the petition are the relative merits of the Milwaukee public and private schools assessed in terms of the education or educational climate they offer children. There is no mention of courses of study, rates of graduation, reading scores, school safety, or the presence or absence of drug use. In short, the petition opposing the parental choice program does not touch a single issue that a parent of a school-age child cares about."

What Williams, Patrick and a growing band of choice activists care about is quality education for their children. And unless I misread the mood of millions of frustrated black parents, they are going to find an awful lot of support.



Williams