

Commentary

A little green to go along with the gold

By Scott Spittal

He stands in golden glory above the gray building, perched precariously above the Capitol Dome.

Some would say he symbolizes the great pioneer spirit that made Oregon great—and others intimate that the brilliant reflection of rain clouds off his golden surface shines on only those with a little green to go along with the gold.

He points off into the distance, his eyes fixed on far-off Portland. Rain or shine, cold or hot, he stands there as a guardian and reminder of the responsibilities embodied in the legislature that meets under his calloused, trail hardened toes. The responsibilities of guiding, protecting and responding to the needs of the people of Oregon.

The responsibilities of government. The Pioneer symbolizes the supposed spirit of Oregon—a trailblazer, a tamer of new frontiers. He stands tall, alone, his arm pointing into the far sunset—and occasionally, it seems he may be in a whimsical mood, and that arm bends back slowly, secretively, to his nose...

With the passage of time, that pioneering spirit has undergone a metamorphosis—to the point where the spirit of breaking in the new has become breaking up the new—and stopping reform desperately needed, stopping reform that might take a little of the tarnish from the golden glitter of the golden pioneer.

Changes do come to the legislature, and occasionally the forces of green are stopped dead in their tracks—one example being the 1971 bottle bill.

But the changes that do come through Oregon's legislature, while courageous at times, exemplary at others, have a common denominator—it helps those who are visible—it helps those who need help the least.

The legislature can be amazingly receptive to legislation to help the downtrodden if these who are doing the trotting don't lose their footing—an example is the package of bills introduced and passed in the legislature this session to improve access for the handicapped.

The legislature itself is like a plant—it feeds and nourishes the roots from which it came, the middle class whites of Oregon. But occasionally, there comes before these august bodies a measure from a different soil, with a different leaf and no common roots...

If a legislature could ever be

distinguished between the patrician and the plebian, the Oregon House of Representatives would hold the distinction of being closer to the plebian ideal than the less populated, seemingly more distinguished Senate.

The floor is crowded with desks, papers, the litter of legislative defecation. The debates seem a trifle more rowdy, the representatives a bit more salt of the earth. Even the House pages fit the image—they wear a trite uniform resembling tablecovers at an Italian restaurant, checked red and white.

And in the far back corner of the chamber, near the door, is candyland—a small table with those frosted glass jars like the little corner candy store used to have. The jars are filled with chocolates and mints and thousands of little goodies.

While acrimonious debate on different measures rises on the floor, with the corner of your eye you can usually catch some distinguished representative hitting up a candy jar and scoring his fix.

Such was the case a few months ago after the House had just finished passing a bill that would provide non-profit housers of farm workers with a tax break.

The bill had been hailed as a progressive measure on the floor, as a method by which plight of poor migrant laborers could be somewhat alleviated. The tax incentive in the bill was designed to stimulate better housing—from all six non-profit housing co-operatives in the state.

The bill didn't shake the footing of any trodder—nobody loses any money except the state (and that is a trivial amount) and the representatives could pat each other on the back for their humanitarian gesture as they raided the candy counter.

Then came another bill—and the golden pioneer's arm started moving ever so slowly, towards his nose...

The bill would have extended minimum wage coverage to farm-workers regardless of the volume picked. The old, the aged, the poor that toiled for such paltry piece-rate money in the fields, would, in this day of enlightened progress, be covered under legislation that most other workers have had for decades.

The bill would have raised the standard of living of the farmworkers, giving them just a little more of that

long green from which all life, of necessity, flows.

The legislators, those guardians of the people, those caretakers of the pioneering spirit, complained that bookkeeping costs would be financially ruinous to the farmers, that the old and aged and handicapped would not be hired because they would not pick up to the cost of their wages, that there was no feasible way of mitigating volume picked with the minimum wage that there was... that there was... that there was...

And the lonely voices in support of the bill complained. Each argument against the bill received a counter, and one legislator cited the essence.

She said there was a simple reason the farmers didn't want the bill. It would cost them money.

The bill came to a vote—and the green factories of Oregon once more showed their colors as the arm of the golden pioneer reached its destination.

The bill failed...

With a little stretching of the imagination, it might be a scene from the Roman Forum Reincarnated in the somber wooden hues of the WPA capitol building.

The couches (desks) are widely spaced, the distinguished senators composed, cool, in the orderly task of determining the course of a state.

Each has his own aide, his own servant feverishly fishing out the mandates of the legislature from the stacked piles of manuscript.

And with a crook of each finger, and a wave of a slip of paper, the pages glide slowly through the aisle, picking up and delivering precious messages of legislative intent.

The men are older in this house, the prestigious title of "senator" seemingly giving them a dignity and wisdom beyond the plebian title of "representative."

And when they stand, clutching the silver sceptre of a microphone when they address the august body, the tones and content of the speech seem more regal, more (pardon the phrase) senatorial.

And yet, in the deep plasterboard of a committee hearing room, a scene (with another stretching of the imagination) was enacted curiously reminiscent of perhaps the most famous incident in the history of the Forum...

A bill had been passed by the House that would allow the appointment of two

students to the state board of higher education. The key phrase in the bill mandated the governor to appoint these students—thus effectively guaranteeing student participation in the process of governing the institutions of learning they attend.

A Senate Committee discussed the bill in generally approving tones and voted to send it on to the floor... but then one senator said that there were some proposed amendments to the bill—so before final action why not talk about them?

The committee not only talked—they acted. They voted to remove the stricture that made the appointment of the students mandatory, thus effectively emasculating the bill.

An aide to the governor testified, saying that the governor intended to appoint students whether mandated to or not. But the question of one committee member hung in the air as the bill was stabbed in the back.

Will the next governor also appoint students?

With the guts of the bill ripped out, the matter stood, and one could almost hear a plaintive cry... Et tu, Brutus?...

Since that action the bill was returned to committee and subsequently the stricken clause was returned to the bill, thus giving the measure teeth. And yet the lesson remains.

The 1973 session of the legislature will end soon. The liquor bills and tax plans and farm legislation and revenue allocations will be enforced, the unfinished business will be put off until 1975.

But the golden pioneer will continue to bask in the rays of the warm Oregon rain, he will continue to lift his far-off gaze to the horizon of the frontier.

And again there will come legislation to aid the downtrodden. There will be cases again where the legislature has an opportunity to fight the massed forces of green, to help that different plant grow, to help those without become a member of those with.

And there will again come a time when the golden pioneer will smile mischievously, and glancing furtively at the state below him, slowly, secretively, bend his arm back towards his nose...

Scott Spittal is an Emerald reporter who spent time covering the legislature spring term.

Letters

An open letter

An Open Letter to Keith Parrish:

(Keith is keeper of the faith, twice unsuccessful candidate for ASUO President, and an all around nice guy.)

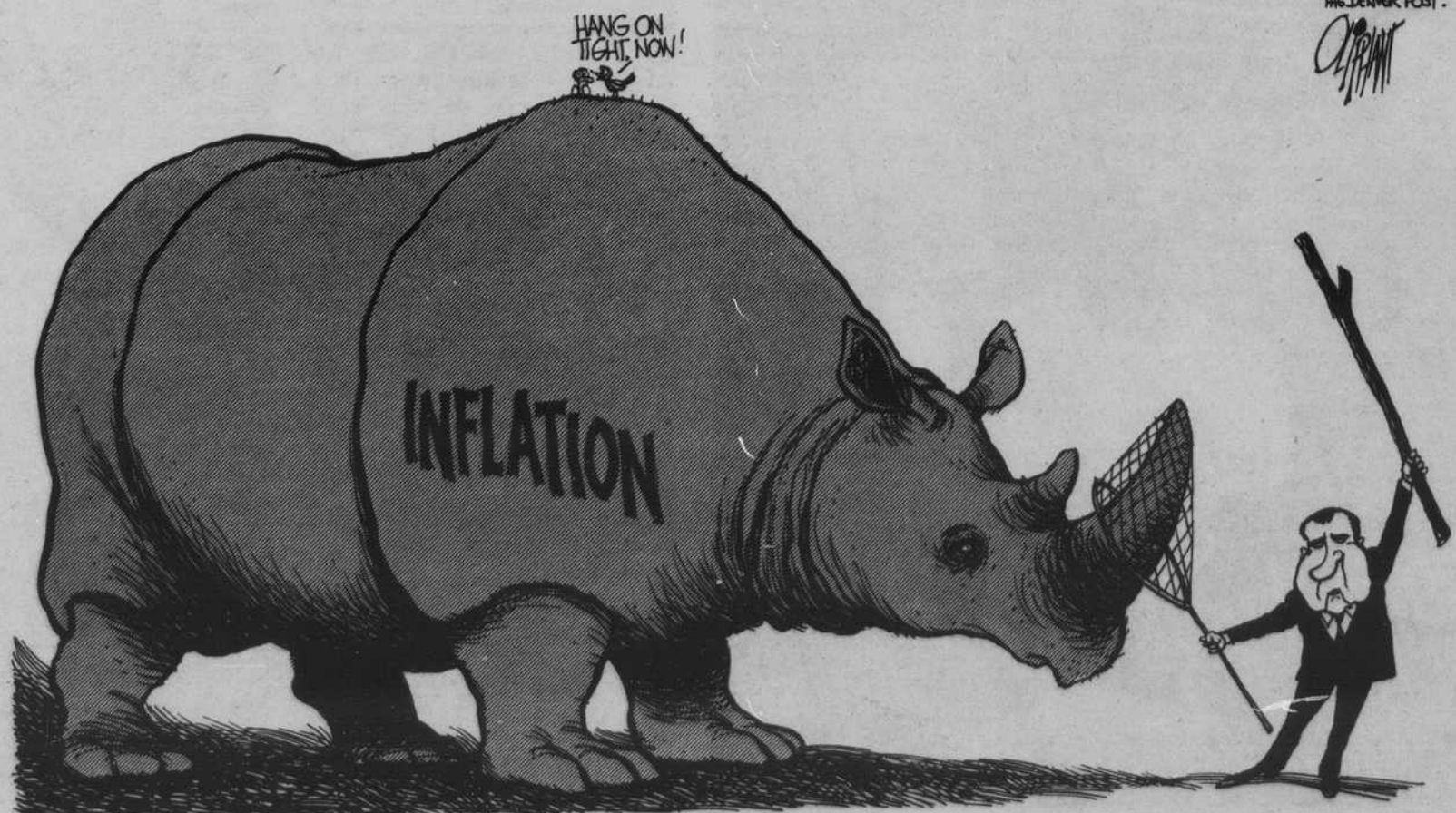
I hope you feel better for getting all that off your chest, Keith.

John Andrews
Junior

Letters Policy

The Emerald invites letters and commentaries. In order to provide a forum for open discussion of issues and ideas all letters which are 300 words or less and are double-space typed and signed in ink will be printed regardless of the viewpoint expressed. Letters intended for publication must be accompanied by an address, phone number and class status at the University.

Longer pieces will be considered for Commentary, but because of space limitations not all those submitted can be printed. Pieces will be selected by the editors on the basis of quality and relevance. The maximum length for commentary is 1500 words.



'... THEN, PICKING UP THIS BIG STICK, WE BELT IT FIRMLY BUT MODERATELY BETWEEN THE EYES!'