

Bipartisan House would benefit state

I knew something was wrong an hour after I was sworn in.

All 60 representatives had just taken an oath to work for the people of the state of Oregon, yet when it came time to elect the Speaker of the House, 33 Republicans voted for one person and 27 Democrats voted for another. Not one representative, including me, was willing to breach party loyalty.

Equally sobering, the two contenders for Speaker had just spent a year raising money for their party's candidates running for the Legislature. Their strength was their political prowess, not their policy expertise.

That's when I began to think this process needs to change.

In fact, in those first few days of my term I noticed other problems that most Oregonians never hear or read about.

Maybe I was naive, but I could have never imagined what happened to Dr. Alan Bates in his first term. Bates is a respected family physician from Ashland who helped write the Oregon Health

Plan. He is a Democrat. And because of that, the Republican leaders refused to assign him to the health care committee. Apparently his formidable expertise in health care might have interfered with the Republican agenda. Or it might have made Dr. Bates look good.

What kind of system is this?

It is not just Republicans. Democrats are just as guilty when it comes to legislative strategies that often have as much to do with winning elections as doing the right thing for Oregon.

The 2001 Legislature met in five special sessions, each more gut-wrenching than the last. Our state faced monumental budget woes. So how did we sort through our options? The Republican representatives went into one caucus room; the Democrats went into another. Such separation breeds suspicion, mistrust and conflict.

Both parties spent hours strategizing how to blame the other for any painful, unpopular prescriptions. Caught in the crossfire were schools, vulnerable citizens and taxpayers.

In my tenure in Salem, I've seen countless

examples of party leaders protecting the special interests that supported their party during the previous election cycle. As the parties compete for the money that brings them power, the interests of our citizens are too often left by the side of the road.

There is a better way.

We should make our Legislature nonpartisan. Primary elections would consist of a single contest open to all; the top two vote-getters would advance to the general election. Party labels would not appear on the ballot.

Crazy? Hardly. Look at Nebraska, not exactly a land of wild-eyed radicals. The Cornhusker State has had a nonpartisan legislature for 70 years.

Oregon faces daunting challenges: aching unemployment, crowded classrooms and a dysfunctional tax system. It's hard to find solutions in partisan warfare. But those challenges will be easier to meet if we can tap the talent of Oregon's best leaders — regardless of their political stripes.

Democratic State Sen. Charlie Ringo represents Northwest Portland and the Sunset Highway Corridor.

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March division separates feminist allies

There have often been articles or editorials or opinions stated in the Emerald that have frustrated me.

GUEST COMMENTARY

Generally, these frustrations make for some good conversation with my peers or at least provoke some good internal dialogue. Not until recently have I actually had the urge to write something down, hoping it would be published. The news in brief outlining the decision of the

segregation of marchers for the Take Back the Night scheduled April 29 ("Take Back the Night march will feature three sections," ODE, March 3) exasperates me.

Activists will be "divided" into women, gender-queer and gender-neutral. I know what a woman is, I am not sure what is meant by gender-queer and gender-neutral, and furthermore, I don't think it matters what the difference is. I don't understand why when the grounds for the demonstration are so uncomplicated and clear (i.e. education of and prevention of sexual violence

against women) it needs to be turned into an intricate division of who can march with whom.

This is also along the same vein as the protesting and heated emotions that were brought about by "The Vagina Monologues." Do people not realize that the whole point of these two events is to inform about women's issues and help put a stop to the prevalent violence against women? Why are so many people who have the same goals and objectives spending time arguing the minor points? This only serves to detract from and

lessen the strength that is amassed by groups of the populace, who are, on the whole, fighting for the same thing.

Everyone is different; no one lives the same experience regardless of gender, sexual orientation or race. To say that someone hasn't truly experienced something, because they don't fit into the categories that you have defined those experiences to fall into, is absurd.

Laura Shirtcliff is a graduate student studying chemistry.

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