

HOT AIR SOCIETY BY TONY CORCORAN

Of Grand Bargains and Granfalloons

PERS, POLITICS AND THE GRAND BARGAIN IN SALEM

Remember back in 2013 when then Gov. John Kitzhaber, House Speaker Tina Kotek and Senate President Peter Courtney held a three-day special session of the Legislature?

Me neither. I'm so old I've committed to remembering only future events from now on. Learned that from Yogi Berra: t cuts down a lot on my short-term memory loss.

Anyway, the three of them were praised and criticized when they concocted a convoluted clusterfuck of five unrelated bills known as the "Grand Bargain," dubbed that because of the disparate elements of the bills — from PERS reform to genetically modified plants and everything in between.

The 2013 bargain included PERS reform on the backs of workers (sound familiar?) and cuts to Oregon seniors' medical deduction. There were minor tax increases for C-corporations, and a 13-cents-per-pack boost in cigarette taxes. But the bills also cut taxes for partnerships, limited liability companies, S-corporations and some export businesses. And there was a bill to limit local government regulation of genetically modified plants. (That bill even contained an emergency clause: seriously!)

The unions called it "Grand Theft." There's always a grand bargain of one type or another. But that deal engineered by Democrat leaders managed to piss off large segments of historic party supporters. It wasn't just the teachers and other public employees, it was also seniors and advocates for tax fairness, and environmentalists.

On the one hand you could say: The grand bargain was a bipartisan deal that sent the Legislature home

and kept the state going.

On the other hand you could say: What were Democrat leaders thinking while attacking their own constituents? Is there a difference between Democrat and Republican parties? Kurt Vonnegut would've described each as a granfalloon: "a proud and meaningless association of human beings." Like a Hoosier.

For the record, the Oregon Supreme Court threw out the 2013 PERS reforms two years later in *Moro v. Oregon*. The Legislature's 2013 reforms slashed PERS liability for future pension payments by \$5.3 billion by trimming the cost of living adjustment (COLA) benefits. In 2015 the court's decision eliminated about \$5 billion of those anticipated savings as unconstitutional.

In 2019, our current Democrat leaders, Gov. Kate Brown, Kotek and Courtney, negotiated a suspect PERS bill that stuck public employees in the neck again.

Democrats provided the votes in both the House and the Senate for the 2019 reforms. And they negotiated away state Sen. Floyd Prozanski omnibus gun safety bill and the vaccination bill. After its passage, Brown issued a statement saying she "will not look to public employees for further contributions" to the unfunded liability.

Really? Didn't we hear the same bullshit six years ago?

There will be political consequences for Democrat legislators in the 2020 primaries because of their support for PERS reform. Someone will get "MacPhersoned." That's an Oregon political neologism for being taken out in a Democrat primary from the left for making decisions based on good public policy and not personal political expediency — just like Oregon Republican legislators who made heroic votes on tax measures over

the years got "Tea Party-ed" from the right.

State Rep. Rob Nosse, a Portland progressive and former union co-worker and friend of mine, has already drawn an opponent for 2020. Locally, I'm worried that state Rep. Marty Wilde may get attacked in the primary as well.

When we did our PERS reforms in 2003, state Rep. (and pension attorney) Greg MacPherson was an up-and-coming Democrat with his eye on a future political career — maybe attorney general or even the governorship someday. After all, he was the son of legendary Hector MacPherson, former state senator from Albany and the "father of land-use planning" in Oregon almost 50 years ago.

Greg subsequently was a candidate for Oregon attorney general in 2008, but lost in the Democratic primary to John Kroger, the worst attorney general in recent Oregon history. Kroger subsequently resigned in 2012. Labor forgives; but never forgets? Nope. They did neither in that race. Oregon lost, too.

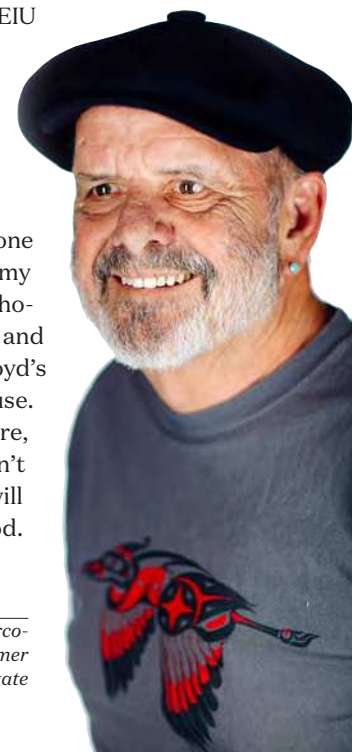
I left the Legislature in November of 2003. Greg and I lived in different worlds. He was an attorney for Stoel Rives, one of Portland's largest law firms. I worked for SEIU Local 503 at the time.

My job went south in a hurry. I enjoyed my five sessions in the Legislature. I loved being a state senator.

Fortunately, no one got "Corcoran-ed" in my case. Prozanski was chosen as my successor and Paul Holvey as Floyd's successor in the House. They're still there, thank god. Kate can't run again, Courtney will retire soon; thank god. But Tina? Hmm.

Stay tuned.

Former state Sen. Tony Corcoran of Cottage Grove is former legislator and a retired state employee.



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