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Why won't Brown lead on PERS?

Public employees union owns the statehouse and its leaders

Here are two numbers that should send shock waves through the state Capitol: 2021 and 33 percent.

By 2021, the Public Employee Retirement System burden on school districts and municipalities will become almost one-third of their payrolls. In other words, a school district like Astoria will be devoting one-third of its payroll expense not to teachers, but to retirees. The practical outcome will be layoffs, fewer teachers.

Those two numbers emerged from the Oregon Leadership Summit last December, as reported by Ted Sickinger of *The Oregonian*. Governing bodies such as school districts and city governments contribute to the PERS system. Steve Rodeman, executive director of PERS, told a panel of economists that government contributions to PERS will rise by 20 percent in each of the next three budget cycles.

Sickinger reported that, "John Tapogna, an economist with ECONorthwest, said legislators had designed an 'unusually exotic' and expensive pension system. He called it a generational mistake, and said the state continues to deal with its aftermath."

At the Leadership Summit, Gov. Kate Brown said nothing about this storm on our horizon.

Oregon is the only state that requires no contributions from employees to their pension fund. If a contribution were required — as is common in private sector defined contribution retirement plans — it would defray a significant future expense.

When asked explicitly what Gov. Brown thinks of the concept of requiring employees to contribute, her press secretary gave us this statement: "Proposals to offset the significant deficit will likely be discussed during the February short (legislative) session. Unfortunately, that's a constrained time frame to resolve such a complex policy issue, and the recent court decision that struck down significant elements of the prior effort to address PERS costs leaves policy-

makers with few viable options that might result in meaningful savings. Needless to say, this is a pressing issue that will need to be considered as we prepare the budget for 2017-19."

Gov. Brown's response is a disappointment, because it contains no leadership. She sounds more like a lawyer or a news anchor — stating the obvious — than a governor. Where is Brown's amazement that Oregon is the only state that requires no employee participation in retirement funding? Where is her anger about the pending horror in which school districts and cities will be decimated to pay for a phantom workforce of retirees?

Brown's neutered response is a symptom of what sets Oregon apart.

The *Wall Street Journal* on Dec. 29 reported that in several states Democratic leaders were at odds with their traditional ally, organized labor, on pension reform. "The erosion of Democratic backing for conventional retirement benefits prized by teachers, firefighters and police officers is a sign of how strained government budgets are as obligations for 24 million public workers and retirees continue to mount," reported the Journal.

But not in Oregon. And here's why. We are a one-party state. And increasingly the nominal Democratic party — embodied in the legislative majority and the current governor — is the Public Employees Union Party. As Republican state Rep. Dennis Richardson told us in 2014, "The public employees union runs the statehouse."

It is no secret that the gross receipts tax which the union will place on the November ballot is about bailing out PERS. That is what permits Gov. Brown to shun the mantle of leadership.

FYI: Clippings from the press of the Pacific Northwest and the nation

In Oregon, myth mixes with anger

When mythic histories supplant the complexities of the past, the results can be lethal. Equitable futures for Western public lands won't be achieved when ideologues swagger in, brandishing guns and taking over federal buildings. Rather, they develop from the hard work of collaboration, like the 2013 effort that brought together

the local community, tribes, conservation groups and the state and federal governments to develop a new management plan for Malheur. These are the efforts that best respect the region's history while pointing the way to a sustainable future.

— Nancy Langston in *The New York Times*

Why Teflon Trump is so hard to attack

Readers, this is no caricature — it's Trump unfiltered, alighting briefly on a topic, complicated or trivial, before flitting to the next. And it's not as if Trump bolsters his stump speech with policy

depth in proposals or interviews. If Obamacare is a disaster, what's Trump's replacement? If Common Core is dead, what's his alternative?

— Ruth Marcus in *The Washington Post*

The Clintons' secret language

By FRANK BRUNI

New York Times News Service

Remember the Gores? Al and Tipper?

At the Democratic convention in 2000, they shared that hungry, happy kiss, and it was more than a meeting of lips. It was a window, or so we thought, into a partnership of enduring passion and inextinguishable tenderness.

They're separated now. Have been for more than five years.

And the Edwardses? John and Elizabeth? He resembled a Ken doll. She didn't take after Barbie. That endeared them to voters — endeared him to voters. Only later did we learn about his double life, the furious fights and the copious tears.

We know nothing of other people's marriages. Nothing at all.

So why do we pretend otherwise? Why do we make so many assumptions and judgments?

And why, every election cycle, do we treat candidates' spouses and unions as the keys to their characters?

We can't trust what's paraded in front of us any more than we can take what journalists and opponents dig up as the essential truth. A person's intimate life isn't readily fathomed, and on the inside tends not to look anything like it does on the outside.

Bill Clinton hit the campaign trail this week. That brought back memories, or rather Donald Trump hauled those memories to the surface, and we were reminded anew of all that Bill and Hillary have been through (and have put us through): the infidelities, the intern, the lies, the smears.

We were also reminded of Hillary's role in defending him. How did that square with her claim to be a champion of women? It's fair to ask.

But the fascination with the Clintons as a couple goes beyond that question, beyond those scandals, to the belief in many quarters that we can divine something essential about each of them by the fact that they teamed up and stayed together.

According to her fans, it's a measure of her understanding that people are broken, of her capacity for forgiveness, of her belief in commit-



Frank Bruni



Jim Cole/AP Photo

Former President Bill Clinton waves to a cheering crowd as he arrives during a campaign stop for his wife, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, Monday, in Nashua, N.H.

ments. According to her foes, it reveals a thirst for power that redeems any heartbreak and transcends all humiliation.

It could be proof of both — or neither. The answer isn't gettable. Talk with six different people who know the Clintons well and you hear six different appraisals of their bond, each presented with unalloyed confidence.

I've been told that they light up around each other as they light up around no one else.

I've been told that there's no extraordinary spark there, just a storehouse of shared memories, an accretion of endurable disappointments, a daughter, a granddaughter and a friendship.

I've been told that they're really business associates, intricately involved in each other's lives because they're jointly invested in the perpetuation of their political relevance.

I've been told that they talk more than anyone would imagine. I've been told that they talk less.

In New Hampshire on Monday, when he described his first encounters with her some 45 years ago, he called her "the most amazing person" and said, "Everything she touched, she made better."

Maybe that was a deeply felt tribute. Maybe just a great line.

Heidi Cruz will also be in New Hampshire this week. She's a busy evangelist for Ted, half of a couple who present themselves as perfect. Perhaps.

Or perhaps, as the cringe-worthy outtakes from a Cruz campaign com-

mercial suggest, they're just equally meticulous about the script on which they're collaborating, equally intent on a triumphant denouement.

I'm less and less interested in guessing, because I'm more and more aware of how compartmentalized people are, of how flawed and fruitless it is to extrapolate from one chamber of their lives to another. The stingiest spouse and parent can be the greatest boss, and vice versa. Some-

We know nothing of other people's marriages. Nothing at all.

one who's selfless and principled in one context is sometimes the opposite in another, as if there's only so much goodness to go around.

And no chamber resists exploration and explanation like that of a marriage or comparable relationship.

We're certain that we have it figured out — who musters the most patience, who makes the greatest sacrifices, who's pure, who's sullied — until it falls apart. Then we gape at the pieces, because none are recognizable.

We're certain that social climbing or religious devotion is a couple's glue, when what matters more is the secret language of goofy endearments that they speak. Or the unremarkable daily rituals that they've grown to relish. Or the tempo of his speech. Or the timbre of her laugh.

And when we come to our sweeping conclusions, we're not perceiving but projecting, and we're using couples to cling to our idealism or validate our cynicism. It's a foolish game under any circumstances. It's a dangerous one en route to the election of a president.

Up with extremism in 2020

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

New York Times News Service

From its very inception, Donald Trump's campaign for president has been life imitating Twitter.

His candidacy is built on Twitter bursts and insults that touch hot buttons, momentarily salve anxieties and put a fist through the face of political correctness, but without any credible programs for implementation.

Where Trump has been a true innovator is in his willingness to rhetorically combine positions from the isolationist right, the far right, the center right and the center left. If I were running for president, I'd approach politics in the same way: not as a liberal, a conservative, a libertarian or a centrist.

I'd run as an extremist.

The agenda that could actually make America great again would combine the best ideas of the extreme left and the extreme right. This year is probably too soon for such a radical platform, but by 2020 — after more extreme weather, after machines replace more middle-class jobs, after more mass shootings and after much more global disorder — voters will realize that our stale left-right parties can't produce the needed answers for our postindustrial era. Accelerations in Moore's law, the market and climate change are transforming the workplace, the environment and nation-states, leaving people feeling insecure and unmoored.

It's time for a true nonpartisan extremist, one whose platform combines the following:

- A single-payer universal health care system. If it can work for Canada, Australia and Sweden and provide generally better health outcomes at lower prices, it can work for us, and get U.S. companies out of the health care business.

- Expansion of the earned-income tax credit to top-up wages for low-income workers and introduction of a

negative income tax to ensure a government-guaranteed income floor for every American. In an age when machines are gobbling low-skilled jobs, we'll need both.

- Common Core education standards as the law of the land, to raise education benchmarks across the country, so high school graduates meet the higher skill levels that good jobs will increasingly demand. But those higher standards should be phased in with funding to enable every teacher to have the professional development time to learn the new curriculum those standards require and to buy the materials needed to teach it.

- Controlling low-skilled immigration while removing all limits on H-1B visas for foreign high-skilled knowledge workers and doubling the research funding for our national labs and institutes of health to drive basic research. Nothing would spin off more new good jobs and industries than that combination.

- New accelerated tax incentives and elimination of all regulatory barriers to rapidly scale up deployment of super-fast bandwidth for both wire line and wireless networks to ensure that next-generation Internet services are developed in America. And borrowing \$100 billion at today's super-low government interest rates to upgrade our ports, airports and grids and to create jobs.

- Bans on the manufacture and sale of all semiautomatic and other military-style guns and government offers to buy back any rifle or pistol in circulation. It won't solve the problem, but Australia proved that such programs can help reduce gun deaths.

- To pay for all this, a phased-in innovation and tax agenda that incentivizes startups and hiring. That means: Slash all corporate taxes, income taxes, personal deductions and corporate subsidies and replace them with a



Thomas L. Friedman

carbon tax, a value-added consumption tax (except on groceries and other necessities), a tax on bullets and a tax on all sugary drinks — with offsets for the lowest-income earners.

We need a tax system that shrinks what we don't want — carbon, sugar and bullets — and incentivizes what we need. If we slash corporate taxes, many more

companies will want to locate here, and the ones domiciled here will have the incentive to bring home foreign profits and plow them into research and new business lines.

- An independent commission appointed to review Dodd-Frank and Sarbanes-Oxley to determine which, if any, of their provisions are needlessly making it harder for entrepreneurs to raise capital or start businesses. We need to be sure we're preventing recklessness — not risk-taking.

- Copy Britain: Strictly limit national political campaign spending and the length of the campaign to a period of a few months. It makes it much harder for billionaires to buy candidates.

- Increased military spending and ensuring that our intelligence services have all the legally monitored latitude they need to confront today's cyber-enabled terrorists — because if there's one more 9/11, many voters will be ready to throw out all civil liberties. And with the world cleaving into zones of "order" and "disorder," we'll need to project more power to protect the former and stabilize the latter.

In sum, our slow growth, inequality and national security challenges require radical solutions: strengthening safety nets, curbing the bad environmental and health behaviors that are bankrupting us and paying for it all by sharply incentivizing risk-taking, innovation, investment and hiring.

That calls for a nonpartisan extremist for president who's ready to go far left and far right — simultaneously. That's my 2020 vision, and in four years the country just might be ready for it.