

Opinion

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Mess at the ballot box

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

Gov. Kate Brown, Sen. Jeff Merkley and other Democratic notables are suddenly scrambling to support Amanda La Bell, a registered Democrat who just days ago was nominated by the Working Families Party to represent the 54th House District. Democrats are hoping that La Bell, who co-founded the Bend Diaper Bank, is the right person to mop up the mess the party has made of a perfect opportunity to pick up a legislative seat from Oregon's struggling Republicans.

Democrats, to their chagrin, do have their own candidate on November's ballot. Nathan Boddie, a Bend city councilor, waltzed unopposed through the party's primary. Then disaster struck. In late June, the House Democratic campaign committee yanked its support for Boddie, followed quickly by a cascade of left-leaning interest groups.

At this point, party leaders, including House Speaker Tina Kotek, should have explained to voters exactly why they'd tossed Boddie overboard. What, exactly, did he say? What, exactly, did he do? To whom did he say and do what he did, and what were the circumstances of his offenses?

Instead, the allegations against Boddie have remained maddeningly vague. A press release issued by FuturePAC, the House Democrats' campaign mechanism, referred to "allegations of inappropriate behavior." An earlier FuturePAC statement contained a bit more information, suggesting that Boddie had engaged in sexist behavior and used a homophobic slur. But party leaders steadfastly refused to release enough information to give voters a clear picture of Boddie's supposed offenses, without which, presumably, they hoped everyone would assume the worst.

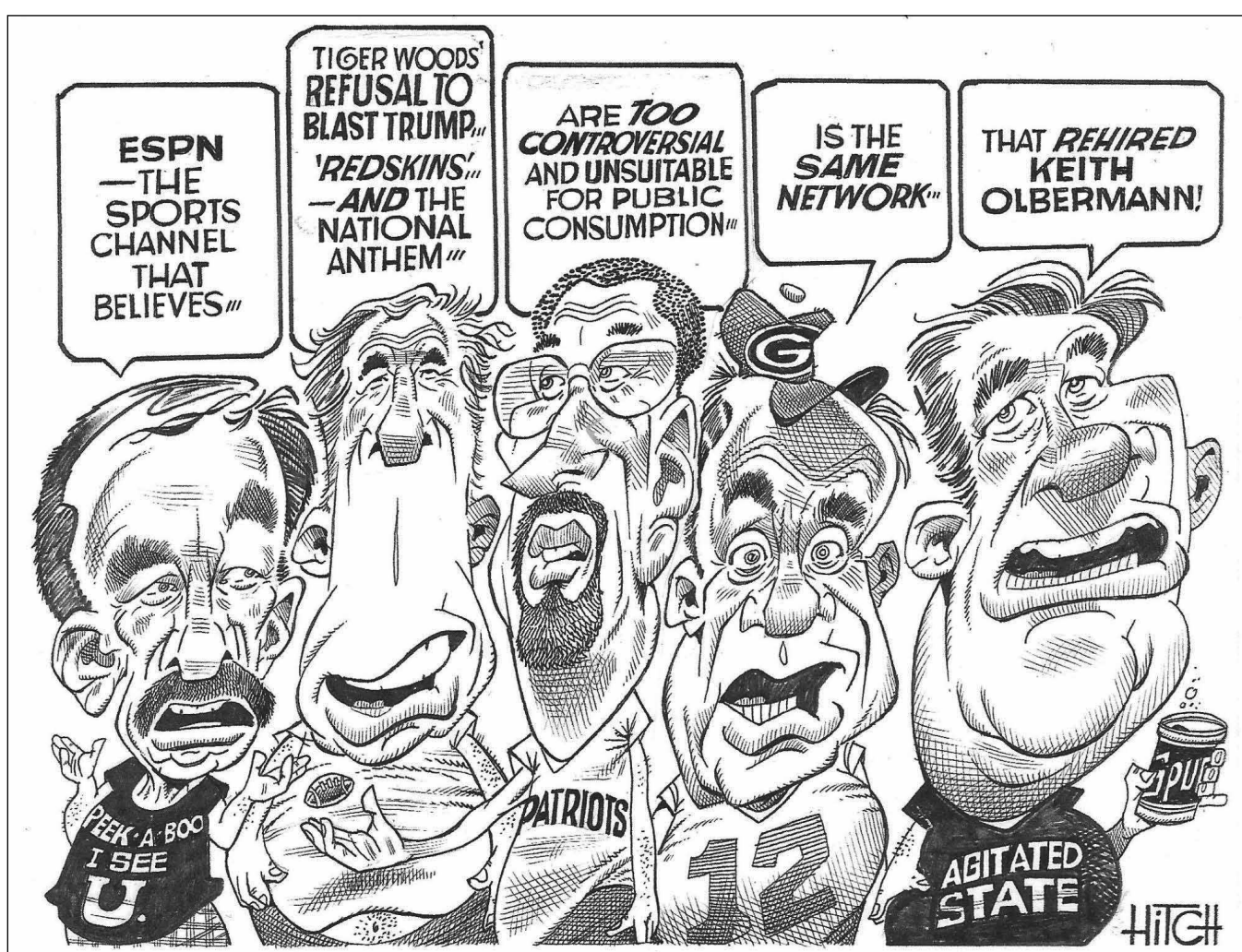
Maintaining this cloak of secrecy did two things. It made a victim of Boddie, whose behavior may, indeed, have been as horrible as Kotek and others would like us to believe. And because it victimized him, the party's shadow campaign created an opportunity — and, no doubt, an incentive — for him to remain on the ballot rather than dropping out. Why, one might ask, should he quit simply because he's lost the support of people who won't tell the public exactly what he's supposed to have done?

Let's assume that Boddie's behavior was deplorable enough to shock the conscience of voters. (His response to a subsequent and unrelated allegation that he'd groped a Bend woman in a bar years earlier certainly doesn't speak well for his good sense or his sensitivity.) And let's say party leaders had done the right thing and detailed the behavior that cost Boddie their support. Do you suppose Boddie, saddled with ugly details, would have refused to drop out of the race? That seems unlikely. And if he had dropped out back in June, the party could have placed a different candidate on the ballot.

Instead, less than eight weeks before ballots will be mailed, a number of Democratic leaders would like voters in District 54 to support a candidate to whom they have just been introduced. The months preceding this year's primary weren't enough for Kotek and company to learn as much as they'd have liked about Boddie, yet we're supposed to become sufficiently well-acquainted with La Bell in the next month and a half to hand her a seat in the Legislature? Democrats are playing voters for fools.

At this late stage, there is only one responsible choice, and that's Republican candidate Cheri Helt. If nothing else, Bend voters know her thanks to her years on the local school board.

In the meantime, here's hoping Democrats — and Republicans — learn a couple of lessons from this year's fiasco. First, operate transparently. If House Democrats had been more open in June, they probably would not have had to resort to last-second electoral gymnastics. Second, encourage multiple candidates to run in party primaries. The pressure and scrutiny of a contested primary might have revealed enough to steer Democratic voters away from Boddie. And if nothing else, a contested primary would have introduced them to other candidates, who could then plausibly emerge as third-party options in the case of a Boddie-like implosion.



Elites failing to listen to citizens

This is a column about listening.

It's about the millions of people in this country who feel that no one cares what they think or values what they do. People who believe that their voice isn't being heard, especially by the elites in this country, whether in politics, the media, academia or the cultural arena.

Over the past few months, I've often used comments from voter focus groups in my columns because hearing directly from voters in their words, not mine, gives readers unfiltered insight into what ordinary Americans are thinking and feeling.

So I want to share what two voters, both from competitive states, told us in focus groups — the first nearly two years ago; the second just two weeks ago.

One man demonstrated why people have such contempt for elites, telling us:

"The elites get their say every day. We get our say once every two years. To me, that's an elite. They override my vote."

Nearly two years later, a second man offered a similar view of the world this way:

"No, I don't think my voice is heard at all. I think I'm in flyover country. I think if I was in New York or Los Angeles, it would be different. But I'm insignificant. And I think that's why Mr. Trump's the president 'cause there's an awful lot of us insignificant people out here."

Both statements are searing criticisms of the influencer class and a sad commentary on where we are as a country today.

A familiar story

For these voters and millions of people like them, the 2016 election feels like it never ended. For them, their frustration with the media and the elites is just as real as it was during that divisive election because, despite Donald Trump's victory, they see no change in the attitude of the elites toward them, the value of their contributions to society or the challenges they face.

Many have lost trust in institutions and the media. In a recent Gallup survey, positive views of the federal government were at the lowest point since tracking began in 2010, with 39 percent positive

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and 59 percent negative. A Pew survey last December found that only 18 percent of Americans today say they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right, with "just about always" at 3 percent and "most of the time" at 15 percent.

There are few signs it's getting better.

In our May Winning the Issues survey, we asked voters if they thought their voice was heard effectively in the political and public policy discourse on major issues. By a 21 percent to 61 percent margin, they said "no." Republicans were at 32 percent to 49 percent (yes/no); independents at 11 percent to 72 percent; and Democrats at 20 percent to 63 percent.

Most people that we survey and talk with in focus groups aren't angry as much as frustrated and despondent over what they see as a political system run by elites who do not understand the problems they are facing. A January 2017 Congressional Institute survey found that by 73 percent to 15 percent, people agreed — elites don't get them or their concerns.

Some political observers — elites themselves — have put the blame for the division we're seeing in the country on ordinary people feeling that they have no purpose. That's certainly not what I've seen in focus groups or in the results of our research.

In fact, it's just the opposite. People believe that it is the elites and institutions that don't value the average person and what they contribute to the nation.

In that same Congressional Institute survey, we gave voters three statements on the value of the middle class and asked them to choose the one that best described their view.

Fifty-two percent said the "middle class feels value in what they are doing and the work that they do, but are not valued by the nation's elites and institutions." Twenty-seven percent said the "middle class does not feel needed or useful in what they are doing and the work they do." Only 12 percent said the

middle class feels value in their work and are valued by the nation's elites.

Change that matters

In 2016, this belief system about elites was one of the key drivers behind the electorate's decision to "rock the boat," to take a risk by electing a candidate who not only rejected the political status quo but offered sweeping change. Among those whose first priority was a candidate who could bring that change, Trump won them by an 82 percent to 14 percent margin, and that rock-the-boat dynamic is still in play.

Elites simply don't understand these voters and find their voting behavior unfathomable because they rarely really interact with them, socialize with them, and, most important, listen to them. And people know it. To quote one voter's attitude toward elites: "They think that because they're (so) smart, that their opinion matters more than yours, because you're not as smart as them."

Frankly, Washington ought to remember that there is an America west of the Hudson and east of the San Andreas Fault, and for people there, dealing with getting by paycheck to paycheck is a bigger priority than the political spat of the week or the latest media preoccupation.

People's views of elites aren't a passing fad. It is an existential threat to government, political parties, the media and even business and academia, because people are fundamentally questioning the motivations and usefulness of so-called experts.

Our institutions and those who lead them need to show that they do, in fact, value average people, appreciate their role in society and have an understanding of their concerns.

If I've learned one thing listening to people express their hopes, their frustrations, and their ideas for the past 20 years, it is that ordinary Americans are thoughtful, insightful, caring individuals whom elites ignore at their own peril.

A good place to start is by listening.

David Winston is the president of The Winston Group and a longtime adviser to congressional Republicans.

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