

Opinion

BAKER CITY
Herald
Serving Baker County since 1870

Write a letter
news@bakercityherald.com

GUEST EDITORIAL

Where are Brown's PERS solutions?

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

It's the start of another legislative session, and the soaring cost of the state's public pension system is, again, a problem that demands lawmakers' immediate attention. So what are the Democrats in control of the governor's office and both houses of the Legislature planning to do about it?

Precious little. They have announced no measures to address the cost drivers behind the system's projected \$26 billion shortfall.

Even Gov. Kate Brown's plan to dramatically increase school spending is hamstrung by the state's pension obligations. Brown has proposed \$2 billion in new taxes for education. She said it would help "to bring our schools back to a level we can be proud of." Inspiring stuff.

The catch is much of that money going to schools won't be making classes smaller, adding teaching resources or extending the school year. It's going to be devoured by paying for benefits promised in the state's Public Employees Retirement System, or PERS. The Oregonian's Ted Sickinger described the bad news in an article that appeared in The Bulletin on Monday.

PERS has a negative cash flow. PERS is paying out far more than it takes in before turning to investments. It took in about \$1.4 billion in contributions from public employers last year. It paid out \$4.7 billion in benefits. Earnings on PERS investments make up the difference.

There are good reasons to worry about that. Investment returns are not always reliable, as anyone fretting over a 401(k) knows. And PERS assumes it will earn 7.2 percent on its investments. That's likely too high. A study by the PEW Charitable Trusts last year said state pension systems would be better off assuming a 6.5 percent return for the next 10 years. But if Oregon took that advice, schools and other public employers would get stung. They would have to jack up their PERS contributions to make up for the decline in investment earnings. They are already likely to pay an increase in contributions of perhaps 38 percent, or \$1.1 billion, over the current biennium.

Another reason to worry is that more and more PERS-covered employees are getting closer to retirement. That is predicted to jack up the PERS benefit payments by \$6 billion in 2024 and \$8 billion by 2035. PERS will need to restructure its investments so it has more cash to hand out. But that means there will be less cash to earn money on to generate investment returns.

Gov. Brown acknowledged problems with PERS earlier this month. "The unfunded liability in PERS is not going away," she said. "We must accelerate our work to stabilize PERS rates so that new dollars go directly into the classroom." She needs to provide a solution that isn't just raising more taxes on Oregonians.

Letters to the editor

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the accuracy of all statements in letters to the editor.
- Letters are limited to 350 words; longer letters will be edited for length. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.
- Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.

Mail: To the Editor, Baker City Herald,
P.O. Box 807, Baker City, OR 97814
Email: news@bakercityherald.com



The scourge of stereotyping

RAMESH PONNURU

One way to tell who's right about the kids from Covington Catholic High School is by looking at the pattern of conversions.

Students from the Kentucky school attending the March for Life in Washington, D.C., were condemned for allegedly mocking a Native American drummer. As more video evidence came out, some initial critics of their behavior have apologized. Nobody who started out defending the kids (or defending them with a reservation or two) has turned critical.

The more rigorous way is to check the claims against the available evidence, as conservative media watchdog Allen Ginzburg has done. He concludes that the teens "were by far the most decent and honorable participants in this whole situation," reporters and media commenters included. The inability of some people to concede the point seems to me to be a testament to the power of partisanship and pride.

But you can read the back-and-forth of those arguments elsewhere. I'm interested in one running theme of the debate: the immense confidence some of the critics have that they know the truth of the matter based on the way the kids look, and specifically based on the face of one of them, 17-year-old Nicholas Sandmann.

In Slate, Ruth Graham writes that Sandmann's face is the key reason the story went viral: "It's the kid's face. The face of self-satisfaction and certitude, of edginess expressed as cruelty."

She quotes other liberal commentators who also read his soul from a brief video clip, or perhaps even a still:

Commentators who were sure that his face was that of a zealot, or an entitled brat. She could have quoted others, too, like the author Reza Aslan, who shared his conviction that the 17-year-old has a "punchable face."

Graham draws a connection — others have drawn it, too — between Sandmann and Justice Brett Kavanaugh. Liberals had a lot to say about his face, too, none of it flattering.

"The face of a boy who is not as smart as he thinks he is, but is exactly as powerful," Graham summed up. (A writer for a major media outlet complaining about the "power" of a then anonymous teenager is perhaps not as reflective as she thinks she is.)

For Anne Helen Peterson, a writer for BuzzFeed, both Sandmann and Kavanaugh have "the look of white patriarchy" — hard to avoid, given that they are white and male — and reminded her of disrespectful kids she used to teach, kids who asked for extensions and plagiarized and snickered in class. She knew hardly anything about Sandmann. She didn't need to know anything. She had seen his type before.

You heard this note of spurious recognition in the Kavanaugh debate, too. People who had no more information about Christine Blasey Ford's allegations than anyone else were sure he was guilty because they knew frat boys just like him.

In many other contexts, it would be

called stereotyping. We like to think that we are more alert to the dangers of generalizations about groups than earlier eras were, and about some of those dangers we probably are. But the habit of mind is hard to shake.

Sandmann had a MAGA hat, which helps explain some of the continuing vitriol directed at him. It's more defensible to criticize him for his choice of headgear than for having a particular facial expression while white.

But the assumption of much of that criticism, sometimes explicitly defended, is that anyone who wears that hat (even a minor!) is a conscious agent of white supremacy. It's an invalid inference based on membership in a large group that is more heterogeneous than the critics allow.

Don't a lot of our political debates these days, especially on Facebook and Twitter, fall into this pattern? Instead of reacting to what other people are saying, we react to what we think people like them believe.

You can find this behavior on all parts of the political spectrum, and sometimes on both sides of an exchange. It's a cognitive flaw and a civic failure.

Sadly, though, I don't expect Ruth Graham or Reza Aslan or the others to have real second thoughts about how they have conducted themselves in this episode. I know their type too well.

Ramesh Ponnuru is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist. He is a senior editor at National Review, visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and contributor to CBS News.

GUEST EDITORIAL

Will Legislature really collaborate?

Editorial from The East Oregonian:

As the Oregon Legislature prepared to start work last week, its leaders were saying all the right things about working together, respecting rural Oregon and doing what was best for the state as a whole.

But, as the saying goes, "only time will tell."

In the Oregon House, the Democratic and Republican leadership have a more collegial relationship than in the past. In the Senate, it seems prickly.

Democrats gained supermajorities in the House and Senate, which enables them to pass tax increases without needing any Republican votes — if all Democrats stick together, which is never a sure thing. Some legislative issues, such as potential changes in sentencing laws, have an even higher threshold for passage. In any case, Democrats cannot conduct business unless enough Republicans are present for a quorum.

Through the leadership of Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, the Senate has acted as a moderating influence on proposals emanating

from the more-liberal House. But the November elections swung the Senate to the left, and Courtney worries about how he will balance the expectations of progressive Democrats with the need to work collaboratively with Republicans.

"We cannot do this, Democrats, without Republicans. You gotta understand that," Courtney said at the annual Associated Press Legislative Preview on Friday. "We cannot do this without Republicans. Without the elephants in the room — another way to put it — the donkeys can't do it."

The question is whether the 90 legislators, as well as Democratic Gov. Kate Brown, will give more than lip service to that collaboration.

The early signs are positive. They almost always are at the start of a legislative session.

Legislators went through civility training recently. Equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans will serve on the joint legislative committee charged with improving the Oregon Capitol culture and overcoming the specter of sexual harassment. Courtney appointed non-urban and urban senators — Democrats Betsy Johnson of

Scappoose and Elizabeth Steiner Hayward of Beaverton — to jointly serve as the Senate's budget leaders. He has introduced Senate Bill 2, with Republican Sens. Bill Hansell of Athena and Cliff Bentz of Ontario, which could be a breakthrough in providing greater land-use flexibility in Eastern Oregon.

It might also be a good sign that legislators are still trying to write the carbon cap-and-invest legislation, which progressives demand and conservatives dislike. Some Democratic legislators had long ago insisted that the legislation, known as Clean Oregon Jobs, was ready. Republicans have strived to make it less onerous for businesses and consumers.

Most bills passed by the Legislature are routine and have bipartisan support. Few of those will make headlines. But many contentious proposals — from taxes to firearms — likely will pit business vs. labor, rural vs. urban and minority Republicans vs. majority Democrats.

Those are the bills that will test legislators' commitment to collaboration, to civility — and to the whole of Oregon.