

“Extraordinary Session” Friday Night in Madison

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Speed and secrecy was the game plan Friday night in Madison as the Senate debated two bills that made significant changes to campaign finance laws and the election and ethics watchdog agency. The bills that finally passed in the wee hours of Saturday morning open the spigot for campaign money and rendered the watchdog toothless and blind.

MADISON - It was Friday night at 5:00 pm.

Most people were leaving work and looking forward to the weekend. Maybe they headed to see friends and family at the fish fry or watch the prep football playoffs.

At that same hour, Senators received details on two very important bills. Legislation that rewrote laws related to elections, campaign finance, lobbying and the ethics of elected officials.

Leaders kept details about changes to the bills secret until the last minute. Details we had not seen; the press had not read; no member of the public had an opportunity to provide comment.

By 7:00 pm, the Senate debate on the two bills began. Final Senate passage happened before the sun came up on Saturday morning. Most Wisconsinites did not hear the debate or see the vote. No TV news cameras observed the Senate. Most reporters had gone home. Senate galleries were mostly empty.

Few realized what happened and Senate Republican leaders wanted it that way.

GOP leaders called an “Extraordinary Session”: extraordinary because the regular fall floor period for final passage of legislation expired the day before.

Senators waited in Madison all week for details of which bills would be up for a vote and how those bills might be amended – changed – before the Senate vote. But, those details didn’t emerge until the sun went down, most of the press had gone home and Wisconsinites were enjoying the start to their week-end.

Big changes were on the way to campaigns and elections. Changes most people would not like – nastier, untruthful campaign ads, shadowy out-of-state groups buying more ads, and less sunlight on campaign donations. A newly created partisan, gridlocked commission would oversee ethics, lobbying and elections. More opportunity for secret deals in the dark.

Democracy needs sunshine. Wisconsin campaign laws should shine light on who donated to whom, when, how much and where that person worked. Groups that want to influence your vote should be required to say where they got their money and how they spent it. Elections must be fair and lobbying transparent.

Laws passed after dark keep voters in the dark. Legislation moving at warp-speed usually means something bad. Friday night in Madison there was certainly enough confusion among Senators about what the bills did and didn’t do which served as a warning that we didn’t know all the answers.

But, slowing things down to get answers and represent voters was not something on the mind of GOP leaders.

It was almost 11:30 pm.

“I didn’t hear a single word about what we’re going to do to help a voter cast a more informed vote,” said Senator Janet Bewley. “But, instead, they [voters] are going to be buffeted by a fire hose of bad information; too many campaign ads, mail, phone calls... This is madness. And it has nothing to do with voters.”

It was now after midnight. The Senate had only begun debating the dismantling of the Government Accountability Board (GAB) – the nonpartisan judges that oversee elections, campaign finance, lobbying and ethics.

Most of the press had gone home. All who remained was a political news service and a single reporter from the local college newspaper.

Supporters of the bill provided no hard evidence to justify dismantling nonpartisan oversight of elections, campaigns and ethics.

Exasperated, the longest serving state legislator in the United States, Senator Fred Risser stood up. He asked the bill’s author, “You just don’t like this agency?”

It was now almost 2:00 AM Saturday morning.

Senator Mark Miller implored the bill’s author. “GAB rose out of the ashes of one of the greatest political scandals our state has faced; created in an equally bipartisan bill. But this bill was created in the dark, brought forth at the last minute. How can we be sure this legislation has the interest of the public at heart?”

When you do not want the world to pay attention to legislation that is not in the public’s best interest, you pass it in the wee hours of Saturday morning.

Speed and secrecy: that was the game plan Friday night in Madison.

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