

The Advocate
February 10, 2008

Our Views: Lent session for our future

For the political class, there is no more appropriate timing for a special session on ethics than Lent.

After what Bobby Jindal called in his inauguration "decades of failure in government," the new governor wants political repentance, and lots of it.

"In our past, too many politicians looked out for themselves. Too many arms of state and local government did not get results," Jindal said in January. "And the world took note."

The special session that begins today is about changing that view of Louisiana in the nation.

We wish Jindal luck. He's pushing an ambitious agenda that could make a huge difference.

For Jindal, it's not just about the past but the future. "The perception of corruption is costing us jobs, costing us opportunity," the governor said last week.

Louisiana needs all the help it can get in attracting new jobs and talented people to rebuild and expand the state's economy. Ethics reform can help make that happen, if it is comprehensive and far-reaching.

Jindal's program is promising.

As many as three dozen significant proposals on ethics law are coming from the administration, with other lawmakers - including, notably, a Democratic caucus eager to compete in ethics reform - contributing more. Because of the restrictions in the special session call, some of those bills might have to await a regular session later.

The special session is something of a test of the new Jindal team as political technicians. Pushing so many measures is a challenge, especially as so many must be funneled through the governmental affairs committees of the House and Senate. That has the potential to create roadblocks.

Yet the important thing is keeping intact the spirit of reform embodied in Jindal's wide-ranging ethics program.

Again and again, he has called upon lawmakers, judges and interest groups to match or exceed the standards of tougher ethics laws in other states, particularly Texas but including dozens of other states with robust laws addressing specific offices or situations.

We do not necessarily endorse every item in the Jindal agenda, nor should the Legislature be a rubber stamp for Jindal.

The administration's legislation is slowly coming out in the form of bill drafts, and however much the governor and leadership might generate agreement in principle, the details of the bills matter.

A lot.

Once they are drafted, these bills deserve searching inquiry into their details.

Last year, reformers in the Louisiana Ethics¹ group found that there were more complexities in ethics law than the boosters of the proposals anticipated.

The governor said he'd like to bat 1.000 in the special session, but if some of the more complex measures bog down, it might end up wiser to defer some to the regular session starting in March.

The Roman emperor Augustus had a personal motto, "Make haste slowly." We want to see a strong set of ethics improvements more than a long list of thrown-together bills passed to make the governor's batting average look better.

But the governor is right in principle about more effective ethics laws: If Texas can do it, or Florida can do it, or 22 other states can do it - depending on which proposal is on the table - is it so impossible for Louisiana to do the same thing?

Jindal also is right to point out that, after so many candidates for governor and the Legislature called for ethics reform, the public expects major change - not just a few or cosmetic improvements.

The Council for a Better Louisiana called the session agenda "the most comprehensive single package of reforms proposed by any governor since the creation of the ethics code itself."

With persistence and luck, this session can surprise the nation about Louisiana's commitment to governmental ethics - and that would be part of our economic resurrection in the future, not just a repentance for the past.