

# Plain Talk

## Part-time Legislature still best idea

Tim Kiefer, who ran unsuccessfully for the Assembly in the September Democratic primary for Dane County's 81st District, did have a great idea.



DAVE ZWEIFEL

During the heat of the campaign, he announced that if he was elected he'd take only half his legislative salary because being a state legislator shouldn't be a full-time job.

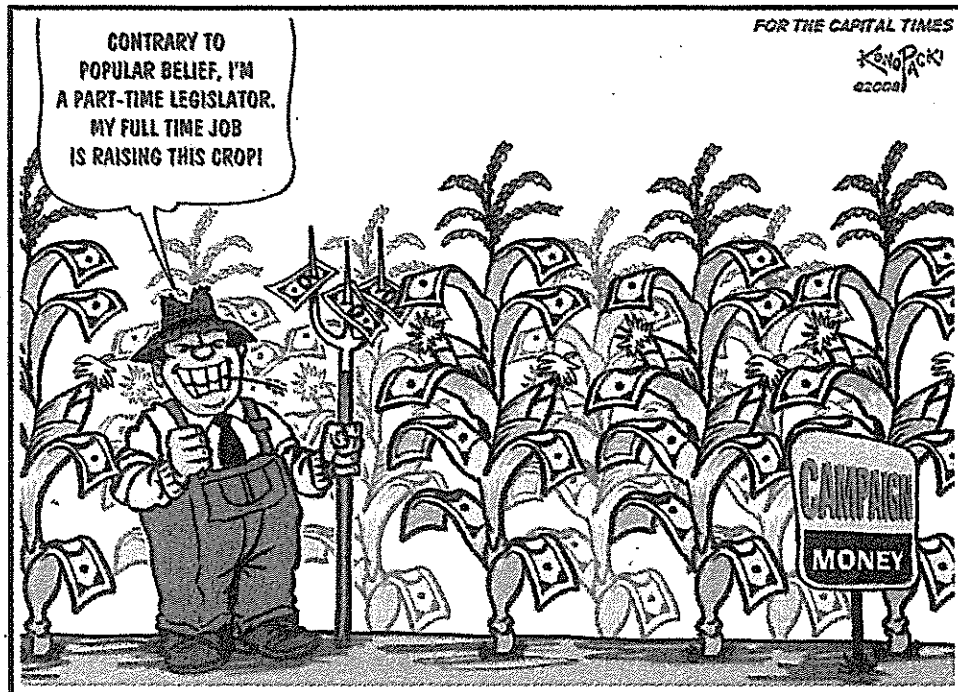
That's what we've been saying around here for decades.

It was good to see at least one candidate agree because by far the worst thing that happened to Wisconsin state government was the Legislature voting itself enough pay years ago to allow legislators to make a living off the job.

That action arguably was the key to changing the face of Wisconsin politics from one in which legislators routinely compromised across the aisle to one that is now overwhelmed by bitter acrimony.

Lawmakers now get \$47,413 a year, which, according to a recent report by the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, is the ninth highest in the nation. In addition, they get health insurance, sick leave (which they remarkably never use because the sick days can be turned into health insurance either at retirement or when they are voted out of office), a significant retirement plan, and \$88 (Dane County legislators get \$44) for each day they're in (or at least close to) Madison. For some those per diems add another \$16,000 to their annual take.

But, as they say in those TV commercials, that's not all. While our 132 legislators have the wherewithal to makes ends meet from their legislative pay, they also get full-time staffs. Those staffers answer



phones, open and answer the mail, and have a lot of time on their hands to promote their bosses. Rep. Steve Nass, for instance, has a full-time taxpayer-paid aide to write and deliver his infamous attacks on the University of Wisconsin.

Because they're full-time, legislators stay in Madison for much of the year, finding, like Nass, all sorts of mischief to keep them busy.

How much better it was when legislators got paid about \$5,000, would come to Madison for a couple of months to do the state budget and take care of necessary legislation, and then go home to their regular jobs and their constituents.

That's the way we did it in Wisconsin for more than the state's first 100 years. It was only after we decided to give the governor four-year terms in 1970 that legislators figured they needed to become more "professional" and pay themselves enough money to do the job full-time.

Some even argued that the issues had become so complicated that legislators needed to spend their time studying bills and learning the nuances of modern life.

And what did that get us? Bills naming a state rock (red granite), a state insect (honeybee), a state dance (polka), and years and years of so much bickering that now not even the state budget gets done on time:

Back when farmers and gas station owners and small-town lawyers were sent to Madison to do the state business in a couple of months, it cost the taxpayers much less money and the state's citizenry didn't have to worry about off-the-wall legislation proposed by legislators with too much time on their hands.

Tim Kiefer was right. Cut the pay in half and get 'em out of town.

We'd all be a lot safer.

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