

RiverOpinion



Where ARE You, Huckleberry Finn?

Richard L. Hershatter

Contributing Columnist

**Said Tom to Huck:
I have a fence –
A whitewash coat it needs,
And with some luck,
Take no offense,
We'll cover all our deeds.**

(apologies to Samuel Clemens)

Back in January, we penned a column entitled "Relax — Tallahassee's Foxes are Guarding the Henhouse."

At the time, we were bemused at the ability of legislative committees to approve of lobbyist-financed junkets and fancy meals for our (according to them) over-worked and under-appreciated politicians.

Admittedly, that column did not anticipate the sheer effrontery of a Bradenton Senator by the name of Mike Bennett — whose gall makes him a poster boy for the concept of term limits.

In his case, however, some of his constituents would argue that a zero term limit would be appropriate.

As reported in a column entitled "The King of Chutzpah," Senator Bennett is a developer engaged in a scheme to buy a mobile home park for \$11 million, evict its tenants to make way for a condominium development, and then require the taxpayers to underwrite the cost of removing and relocating the inhabitants evacuated by his actions.

Pursuant to that endeavor, he introduced Senate Bill Number 934, which would relieve developers from any serious duty to compensate mobile home owners. It would place the burden on local government, on the senator's theory that the increase in value of the land after development would result in an increase in the local property tax base. (If enacted, this bill should be entitled the "ABM Act," because from Mr. Bennett's perspective, the costs would be underwritten by "Anybody But Me.")

It is not that the senator lacks compassion for his less fortunate constituents. His attitude, however, is similar to that of Marie Antoinette, except that he insists: "Let them

eat someone else's cake."

Observers, and some legislators, see a serious ethical question, a clear conflict of interest, but Mr. Bennett claims he is misunderstood and has called upon the Senate's legal advisor for a ruling.

It should be noted that the Senate's legal counsel is an employee of the Senate and serves at the pleasure of that body. At the same time, Senator Bennett is busily engaged in seeking a leadership position during the Senate term beginning on Tuesday.

Surprise, surprise — the whitewash brushes began splashing away almost before the request was received.

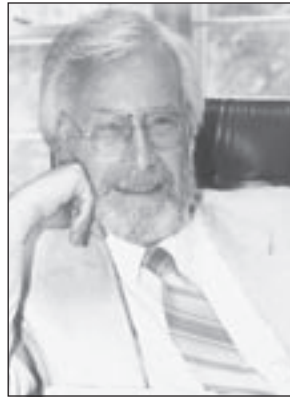
In an advisory ruling, the counsel reported that no "reasonable" person would see Bennett's actions as a conflict of interest because adoption of Bennett's bill would not result in a "special" benefit to him.

As the Church Lady in the old Saturday Night television programs used to say, with pursed lips: "Now isn't THAT 'speshull'?"

In the world as seen by the arrogant Mr. Bennett, his senate colleagues, and their brush-wielding counsel, they alone are "reasonable," and the rest of us lack the capacity to recognize a lack of integrity when we see it.

One lone legislator, a Republican Representative from Venice by the name of Nancy Detert, refused to be intimidated by the Senate steamroller, and has introduced legislation that would give mobile park renters the first right of refusal in any instance in which a developer seeks to purchase a park.

Although such a right, if granted, would be somewhat illusory, because groups of mobile home owners are not likely to be able to raise sufficient sums to meet the deep pockets of developers, it does offer some leveling of the playing field.



The imperious Senator Bennett, however, deprecates the attempt as an intrusion upon a landowner's right to do anything he wants with his land and to sell to whom ever he chooses.

The issue was debated by both legislators a week ago Thursday, before the Sarasota Tiger Bay Club, which is a group of community movers and shakers normally most hospitable to powerful politicians and developers.

Although there is never a clear winner in such events, many members came away persuaded that Representative Detert was on the side of the angels.

As a practical matter, however, there are only two places where a fair solution to the problem can be found.

One is in the legislative session. As can be seen, however, the State Senate has long since lost any sense of fair play and has become a tool of the rich and powerful.

That leaves the electorate itself. Unless voters begin to see that the people they sent to Tallahassee to represent the public interest have become too self-serving to act responsibly, the situation can only get worse.

Politicians habitually count on voters having short memories. If enough people develop a sense of righteous outrage at the shenanigans in the State Capital, the solution is easy.

Go to the polls and vote the rascals out.

**Though it sometimes isn't wise
Just to carp and criticize,
These suggestions are well meant
And are made with good intent.**

**Let the voting numbers speak
For the outcome people seek:
So legislation that is fair
Will not be so often rare.**

(apologies to Gilbert and Sullivan)

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What a Glorious Game It Is!

Tom Burgum

Contributing Columnist

Baseball is back and none too soon. The Pirates and Reds, along with the rest of major league baseball, kick off the spring training schedule this week. According to Walt Whitman, "Baseball will ...tend to relieve us from being a nervous, dyspeptic set. Repair these losses, and be a blessing to us." And, we can be forgiven if we are all a bit nervous and dyspeptic lately. The news has not been good. Iraq seems near to civil war; Congress is all in a dither about Arabs running our ports; genocide seems to be the norm in parts of Africa; the sleaze factor has once again surfaced in Washington; the Bush administration, not content with shooting itself in the foot with mistakes and missteps, now finds its Vice President actually puncturing a loyal Republican with buck shot; and a book claiming Jesus ended up in southern France running an early 7-11 has sold over 30 million copies. All this is enough to make even Democrats a bit dyspeptic.

Worst of all, with winter weather hanging on in the northern climes, the only harbinger of spring has been the annual ground hog day extravaganza in Punxsutawney, Pa. Frankly, this just does not do it. Some fat guy in formal dress holding up a terrified rodent does not herald the outbreak of spring — whether or not the poor beast sees its shadow. Truth is, we all know spring arrives with the advent of baseball.

Tom Boswell of the Washington Post wrote a book entitled, "How Life Imitates the World Series." Boswell is one of our best baseball writers and this is one of those baseball-is-bigger-and-more-important-than-it-seems books. There are many of these, including Bart Giamatti's "Great and Glorious Game." People seem to want to explain its popularity by tying it to our pastoral past, a slower more



pleasant time, or some such nonsense. Baseball can be best enjoyed if you treat it as just a game, an amusement, not a consequential metaphor for life, and definitely not a public trust. Truth is, baseball is a marvelous game that is fun to watch and that should be enough.

Tom Boswell described it thusly, "Baseball is the religion that worships the obvious and gives thanks that things are exactly as they seem. Instead of celebrating mysteries, baseball rejoices in the absence of mysteries and trusts that, if we watch what is laid before our eyes, down to the last detail, we will cultivate the gift of seeing things as they really are." That is a wonderfully complicated way of saying you can watch baseball and actually understand what is happening. This is not always true of football or basketball. How many times have you heard a football coach at the post-game press conference say about a particular play, "We won't know until we watch the films"? If the coaches aren't always sure what has happened how are we supposed to know? It is also instructive to realize that no one has to bring a portable TV set to a baseball game so they can watch the instant replays.

Baseball's gift of understanding gives the fan lifelong memories. Should circumstances decree that my life pass in front of my eyes on the way to the hereafter, I hope it will freeze frame on the sixth game of the American League Championship. This game was played on Oct. 15, 1997. It was a game for the ages and I was there. Cleveland, leading Baltimore three games to two, wasn't even supposed to be in the championship series. The wise men all predicted Baltimore vs. New York but Cleveland had taken the Yankees in five games. Charles Nagy was going for the Indians and, coming off the worst half-year of his career, had the look of a deer in the headlights. Baltimore had Mike Mussina on the mound. He was throwing what would later be considered the best baseball of his career. There was absolutely no way the Indians could win. But, as things sometimes happen, Cleveland won 1-0 in 11 innings. The game was four hours, 45 minutes long. Baltimore left 14 men on base, 11

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