

HISTORY LESSON

Hear that sound? It's the echo of Sharpstown

■ When voters become upset enough, history shows that their elected representatives may pay a severe price.

We have known for years that an antiquated, inadequate and unfair tax system was eroding public education in Texas. But when a state court confirmed that last November by declaring the current system unconstitutional, we could no longer avoid the issue.

The result was a regular session and three special sessions in which absolutely nothing was accomplished. The stunning failure of the Legislature to address the issue has exposed lawmakers to a barrage of richly deserved public criticism.

Legislators blame teachers and superintendents. Democrats blame Republicans. The House blames the Senate. Speaker Tom Craddick, Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and Gov. Rick Perry blame one another.

Now it will be left to the state Supreme Court to rule on the appeal of the lower ruling. (Then they can all blame it on "activist judges" ... But I digress.)

As we await that decision, the public is left with another important question: How should we, as voters, respond to the demonstrated in-

competence of our elected officials? History can be a guide. This is not the first time Austin lawmakers have let us down on an epic scale.

Flash back to 1971. In January of that year, the Securities and Exchange Commission filed a federal lawsuit alleging stock fraud against several defendants, including a former state attorney general, a former state insurance commissioner and a Houston banker and businessman named Frank Sharp.

Only when the press read the fine print of the case did the shocking political implications emerge.

The suit alleged that Sharp had bribed Gov. Preston Smith, House Speaker Gus Mutscher, state Rep. Tommy Shannon of Fort Worth, and State Banking Board member (and state Democratic chairman) Elmer Baum, to secure passage of legislation favorable to Sharp's business interests. It became known as the Sharpstown Scandal.

Mutscher and two others were subsequently convicted on bribery charges in an Abilene court. Smith was named as an unindicted co-conspirator. But the shadow of suspicion fell on many other lawmakers who had ties to Sharp or had supported his tainted legislation, including the rising star of Texas politics, Lt. Gov. Ben Barnes.

So, what does this 30-year-old tale have to do with the current political breakdown in Austin?

On the surface, not much. Sharpstown was a criminal affair arising

more from greed than incompetence. Moreover, it took place when Democrats, rather than Republicans, dominated in Austin.

As it turns out, it is not the particulars of Sharpstown that provide our history lesson, it is the political consequences.

As a politician, Speaker Gus Mutscher had much in common with Tom Craddick.

Mutscher ruled the House with an iron fist: No important legislation passed without his approval. Key committees were stacked with his supporters. He even attempted a blatant gerrymander to defeat his political opponents. When Sharp's well-lubricated banking legislation came before the Legislature in a 1969 special session, Mutscher pushed it quickly through the House.

But when the scandal broke in 1971, a group of legislators calling themselves the "Dirty Thirty" rebelled against Mutscher's "dictatorial" rule.

At one point they introduced a resolution (which failed) calling for Mutscher and his cronies to resign their House leadership positions until the SEC investigation was resolved. Mutscher finally succumbed to pressure to launch a House investigation, only to appoint a hand-picked committee of his closest allies to conduct the "investigation."

But had Mutscher finally overplayed his hand? By the closing days of the session, the speaker and the Dirty Thirty had declared open po-

litical war. (One member called Mutscher and his cronies "neo-Hitler and his Nazi pickpockets.") Mutscher's indictment was but one product of this war; the ultimate outcome would be determined by the next election.

The following year, the voters spoke. Loudly. An unprecedented number of politicians drew primary opposition. Many others faced tough battles in the general election.

When the dust settled, more than half of the members of both houses had either been defeated or had declined to run for re-election.

It was a political earthquake of staggering proportions. Along with half of the Legislature, the casualties included the speaker, lieutenant governor and governor. The next Legislature passed a series of reforms, including stricter financial-disclosure laws for elected officials and lobbyists, and greater access to governmental records.

It is still too early to tell if the current Legislature's bumbling will lead Texas voters to mount a Sharpstown-style electoral revolt.

But there are some signs. During the last special session, a few brave Republicans challenged once-untouchable Craddick. Like the Dirty Thirty, they realized voters back home were getting fed up with a Legislature that seemed content to fiddle while Rome burned. Among the Republicans who broke with Craddick was House Appropriations Chairman Jim Pitts, who explained,

"I have to listen to the people that sent me here."

One more parallel with Sharpstown bears remembering: Although Democrats dominated Texas politics in 1971, the Dirty Thirty was a coalition that transcended party and political ideology. Its ranks included liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, including, a young Midland representative named Tom Craddick.

They were united only by a sense something was rotten in Austin, and the people of Texas deserved better. The voters agreed and, in an unprecedented act of political independence, ended the careers of those who had violated the public trust.

Next year, Texans will have an opportunity to send a message to elected officials who have turned a blind eye to the pressing needs of the state. When the time comes, don't accept excuses.

Don't vote strictly on party affiliation.

Don't listen to demagogic appeals based on race or religion.

Don't expect benefits that you're not prepared to pay for.

Study the voting records of your elected officials — especially on the issues of education and taxes.

Then, if your public servants aren't serving you, send them a message.

Kick the rascals out.

Gregg Cantrell of Fort Worth is a history professor at Texas Christian University and a member of the Star-Telegram's Community Columnist Panel.


R.J. MATSON



"CONSUMERS ARE ADVISED TO EVACUATE THEIR S.U.V.'S!"

R.J. Matson is an editorial cartoonist for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

BOB ENGLEHART



Bob Englehart is an editorial cartoonist for The Hartford Courant.

Cheers: To Herbert D. Stephens for being named athletic director of the Fort Worth school district.

Herbert D. Standifer, Fort Worth

Cheers: To Wayne Pricer for his Aug. 27 jeer of the U.S. government and, indirectly, columnist Bob Ray Sanders. Sanders simply is exercising his First Amendment right in expressing a valid opinion that doesn't agree with Pricer's. That's not treason but, rather, a contribution to a healthy dialogue.

Phil Dunlop, Hurst

Cheers: To Wayne Pricer for his exceptionally proper and well-placed Aug. 27 jeer about Fort Worth's finest seditionist, Bob Ray Sanders. Jeers also to the Star-Telegram, Fort Worth's finest liberal rag, for printing Sanders' leftist drivel.

Chris Hummell, Arlington

Cheers: To Rachell Howard and her co-workers at Frank Kent Honda's service department. Our daughter was visiting from Brownsville, and her car had air-conditioning problems. They repaired/replaced its AC system in a day! What wonderful service! We'll recommend them.

Carol Vlasich, Fort Worth

Cheers: To Pierce and Joyce Jones for celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary after her survival of breast cancer.

Effie Foster, Arlington

Cheers: To our wonderful neighbors, Ruthie and Allan, who place our Star-Telegram on our front porch each morning. What a great act of kindness.

Becky Garrett, Arlington

Cheers: To the Arlington City Council, the Arlington Conservation Council, the League of Wom

en Voters, the South West Action Team, MPAC and Arlington residents who all came together to pass a residential tree ordinance. This is a huge step forward and proof that the council listens and responds to its constituents.

President Wayne Halliburton, Arlington Conservation Council

Cheers: To the wonderful people at the Aug. 26 Trinity High School football game who came to my aid when I was overwhelmed by the heat during halftime. So many people stopped by to check on me! Thanks to the paramedics who made sure I was doing OK. And thanks to the Trinity "Hawgs" dad who gave me an ice-cold bottle of water. I owe you!

Brenda Harris, Bedford

Cheers: To a local alteration shop for a shoddy job on my jersey. I didn't pay, so I won't sue for the \$40 jersey that you ruined. We're even.

Dawn Graham, Arlington

Cheers: To Debbie Taylor, writer of an Aug. 27 jeer that accused our president of "luring" our troops to service under false pretenses. These brave soldiers voluntarily signed up with the armed forces to defend our great country, with perks. If a police officer gets shot in the line of duty, is it the police chief's fault? God bless our troops and their families.

Zach Collett, Arlington

Cheers: To roofing and lawn contractors who make appointments for estimates and then don't show up or even have the

courtesy to call. They run ads but apparently don't want to work.

Cindy Winters, Granbury

Cheers: To the mother pictured on the front of the Aug. 27 Fort Worth section whose infant daughter is shown sitting in a five-gallon bucket of water. Children have drowned after toppling into these buckets and not being able to get out. Jeers also to the photographer for not understanding that this is more of a danger than not having air conditioning.

Staci C. O'Toole, Alvarado

Cheers: To Jeff Davis of Grubbs Nissan in Bedford for great customer care. He always has time to make you feel special.

Pam Smith, Argyle

Cheers: To Les Lennox for his Aug. 17 letter to the editor, "A lack of wisdom." He said it very well, and I agree. The B-36 Peacemaker should have stayed in Fort Worth. At least two B-36s are in museums: one in Tucson, Ariz., and one in Omaha, Neb. — and both were made in Fort Worth. What a shame. Jeers to the mayor and Fort Worth City Council members.

L.J. Thom, Fort Worth

Cheers: To the Fort Worth Transportation and Public Works Department. Streets in the Handley area have been repaved recently. They look great and are greatly appreciated. The temperatures you worked in were unbelievable. Thanks for the blood, sweat and tears.

Debi Brantner, Fort Worth

Cheers: To Douglas Mabe at

Bankston Chevrolet. We appreciated his bend-over-backward attitude. He was very informative, professional and patient. It was a pleasure doing business with Bankston Chevrolet. We'll be back.

Royce and Judy Holley, Hurst

Cheers: To the wonderful knight in shining armor who rescued this "damsel in distress" when my vehicle broke down off Chapman Road. He assessed and repaired the problem. He went above and beyond. May God bless your kind and generous soul.

Virginia Reyes, North Richland Hills

Cheers: To Dr. Ann Rousche, who donates her time and talent doing free eye exams each month in conjunction with the Prevent Blindness Program and the JPS clinic at the Salvation Army in Fort Worth. Cheers to the Lions Club that provides the free eyeglasses.

Glenda Gardner, Fort Worth

Cheers: To the staff at Harris Methodist Fort Worth and to Dr. Antonio Castaneda for their help

and for providing assistance for the surgery on our friend Israel Amara. There are still people who care for the common man.

Alice and Charles Velazquez, Fort Worth

Cheers: To U.S. District Judge Terry Means for sentencing former Fort Worth police officer Ruben Omar Ruiz to 27 months in federal prison for kicking a man in the head repeatedly during an arrest. He said, in part, that violation of civil rights was a serious offense, and that he wanted to send a message to the police that they ought not to do it.

Carl Fox, Hurst

Cheers: To all the outside law enforcement officers and National Guard personnel who are on the Gulf Coast helping keep law and order in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Special cheers to those from the Cleburne Police Department. These brave men and women have taken time away from their families to help in Louisiana on their days off, prepared to forgo sleep and sustenance. I can't tell you how proud I am to

be associated with them.

Dispatcher Akala A. Murray, Cleburne Police Department

Cheers: To Texans who are helping our neighbors in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Landlords with empty rent houses, please open your hearts to the homeless. You have more than one home; they have none.

Darla Wilson, Fort Worth

Cheers: To Larry Mills and SuperSave of River Oaks for letting me collect donations for the American Red Cross on Sept. 3-4. Cheers to the angel who brought me cold fruit while I sat outside taking donations, and special cheers to River Oaks residents for their contributions to help our neighbors from the Gulf Coast.

Lygia Dunsworth, River Oaks

Cheers: To Jerry Alvarado of Alvarado Sprinklers. He's great about coming out to fix a problem in a timely and cheerful manner. An RV driver who filled up at a service station on his way to Louisiana to help out went in to pay for \$175 worth of gas and found that Jerry had paid the bill and told the clerk not to tell who did it. Angels are among us.

Judy Hale, Fort Worth

This Sept. 3 cheer is being reprinted because editing altered the meaning.

Cheers: To P.T. Burns and everyone we dealt with at Vandergriff Acura in Arlington for making our car-buying experience most pleasurable. P.T. doesn't rely on high-pressure tactics to generate a sale. His friendly personality was shown even after the sale with his follow-up calls and a hand-written note of thanks for our business. We love our new Acura TL and will refer anyone to P.T.

Dottie Casey, Fort Worth

HOW TO SUBMIT A CHEER OR JEER

Limit your Cheer or Jeer to about 50 words. Full name (signature and printed), address and daytime telephone number are required. There are some restrictions on subjects. Items may be edited.

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