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Deficit Blues Settle Over State

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This is the first of a three-part series on the current budget mess.

Wisconsin's budget debate is getting pretty weird, by turns vacuous and vicious.

Gov. Scott McCallum's plan for closing our latest billion-dollar deficit - the last being just six months ago - is to sell off the rest of the state's tobacco legacy and hurry our cities toward bankruptcy.

This "solution," at once short term and permanently damaging, is hailed by the state GOP as "brave" and "visionary" leadership. But then the GOP is in full campaign mode - replete with a blitzkrieg of pro-McCallum TV ads, orchestrated "taxpayer rallies" in support of his proposal, and a daily drumbeat of character attacks on his would-be Democratic opponents this November. The response from those candidates and the Democratic legislative leadership, meanwhile, echoes the fabled sounds of silence. The best comment they can offer on the shared revenue scam is that it is "dead on arrival." Terrified of falling into McCallum's trap of suggesting tax increases, they offer no alternative of their own, although they do plan a series of public hearings on the mess. Maybe the public will give them some bright ideas.

The shallow genius of the McCallum proposal is that it buys the political support of the powerhouse spenders on both sides of our narrowing political aisle - Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce on the Republican side, the Wisconsin Education Association Council on the Democratic. Neither is hurt in the governor's plan, and neither has ever been accused of mistaking the state's interest for its own.

Thus the present spectacle - at news conferences, rallies and other campaign events - of these two great beasts nuzzling one another, and the governor, while braying their support.

And what of the opposition? There are only the poor and working classes, characteristically disorganized; the Democratic Party, an empty shell of an organization; and our Democratic leaders, mostly candidates (or in the case of our elected federal officials, AWOL as usual on state affairs), now at war with one another over the gubernatorial race, if not older grievances. Achieving a united front among this crew - say, some common principles of budget reform that unite them while distinguishing them sharply from the governor - is about as difficult as herding frogs into a wheelbarrow.

For those who have long wondered what is the sound of one hand clapping, I believe we now have an answer.

This charade may eventually be ended by something more venerable than present leadership - namely, the state constitution. It requires that any cutbacks in shared revenues be approved by the Legislature; the governor cannot just cut them on his own. So if the Legislature does nothing - something it's pretty good at already - the money will flow on schedule, and the projected deficit will become a fact.

McCallum's current game is to force the Democrats to be the first to say something serious about the deficit, ideally including the T word - the better to attack them during the campaign. But he may not win this game of chicken.

What is urgently missing here is any public discussion, of the sort that might eventually inform or displace such elite maneuverings. Perhaps this is because people are out of practice. Going on 20 years now, state politics have increasingly been run as an insiders' game, decided in the essentially private sanctum of the budget process rather than through open debate and vote.

The leaders of both parties have been complicit in this transformation of how we govern ourselves. Republican governors have liked it because the budget is where they wield their greatest power - the partial veto pen, which is indeed mightier than their word. Democratic leaders have liked it too, at least in a chronically divided Legislature, because it permits them to get something done without organizing a majority of their colleagues. And both sides enjoy its secrecy, which greases the deal-making and limits accountability to the public.

* But these gains to political elites mark equivalent losses to an informed public - itself a shadowy creature in Wisconsin, now sighted less frequently than Elvis. Most of us just stumble confusedly from one budget crisis to the next, never pausing long enough to have a serious conversation about where the state is headed. And at this point our leaders don't even generate the baseline needed for such a conversation - clarity on what's at stake, and who gains and loses under different solutions to our budget problem.

It is said that in war, truth is the first casualty. In Wisconsin budget politics, there's a pileup of victims.

Next week, let's cart away at least some of them.

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