

COMMENTARY

INSIDE REPORT

New challenge to typical views in Legislature

On your typical day in the State Capitol, in a typical hearing room, a typical committee will hear from three or four sets of witnesses on a typical bill. And the typical witness is paid to be there, or has very specific personal financial interest in the bill in question.

And typically, for that reason, the only bills that are controversial are those which involve fights among monied interests. For only then are the typical lobbyists deployed to fight for a measure that typically is about the interests paying the lobbyists to be there.



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And typically, as a result of this interest-group lock, debates about options for the state tend to be narrowly defined as what's good for No. 1. The ideological debate runs the gamut from A to B, or at most C.

Capitol debates never even reach the moderate middle of the alphabet.

The debate about the state budget has been dominated by Gov. Bobby Jindal's election-year call for no tax increases, which he broadly defines as not even renewing some expiring taxes. And he won't cut back on the numerous corporate tax breaks granted for years by the typical Legislatures of the past, despite cuts to state universities and health care.

A few new voices are widening the debate this year, and prompting at least some questioning of the ultraconservative orthodoxy in state politics.

The Louisiana Budget Project is challenging that slash-and-burn attitude toward state services. Established by the Louisiana Association of Nonprofit Organizations, the Budget Project is affiliated with the liberal-leaning Washington think tank, the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.

The Budget Project, headed by Eddie Ashworth, challenges some of the more egregious of the corporate breaks granted in Louisiana.

"The governor's cuts-only strategy is doing long-term damage to our state. We need a balanced approach to solving the fiscal crisis, one that includes additional sources of revenue," Ashworth says.

Another group that is gaining more attention is Louisiana Progress, headed by Melissa S. Flournoy. It has allied with the Budget Project, civic groups and unions in the Better Choices for a Better Louisiana coalition, favoring the idea of some revenue-raisers to mitigate the impact of cuts to state institutions.

"We can't cut our way to excellence," says Flournoy, a former state legislator.

Her group is a Louisiana nonprofit, but it is promoting the policy ideas of the Center for American Progress. That is the Washington think tank — headed by John Podesta, President Bill Clinton's former White House chief of staff — that was almost a Democratic administration-in-exile during President George W. Bush's terms.

Louisiana Progress is not only pushing on the fiscal policy front. It also backs the drive to repeal Louisiana's embarrassing anti-evolution law passed in the first year of Jindal's term.

With a Republican trend in state politics, and a Legislature that is all too typical of the business-owned lawmakers of recent years, it will be interesting to see if the policy ideas of the newer and more liberal groups get a hearing in the State Capitol.

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