

Phillip Tutor: Alabama's 'failure of governance'

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Methodically, coldly, like a 6-year-old wielding a Ginsu, Montgomery lawmakers are carving off the arms and legs of Alabama, all in the name of fiscal survival. The scars are deep.

Soon, only the dismembered torso will remain.

The state Department of Agriculture and Industries?

Layoffs.

Alabama's court system?

Layoffs.

State archives?

Potential layoffs.

State mental-health services?

Potential closings.

State forestry service?

Potential layoffs, nearly one-third of its staff.

Elsewhere?

It's a lengthy list, if Gov. Robert Bentley and the state Legislature do as expected: Fewer restaurant inspections, fewer employees in district attorneys' offices, fewer enrollments in the heralded ALL Kids insurance program, fewer substance-abuse treatment services, fewer screenings for children exposed to domestic violence. And that's hardly all.

It is, to borrow the words of Alabama Arise's Kimble Forrister, "a failure of governance."

It's not grim. It's worse, if there is such a thing.

In Wisconsin, the villains were unionized state employees, whose collective-bargaining rights were taken away amid days of round-the-clock protests. In Alabama, the villains are anyone — and anything — on the state-government dime.

In other words, any state agency, or most state employees, or anything that gets General Fund

money — museums, agencies, charities, organizations — is in line at the Bentley guillotine, waiting for judgment before the General Fund executioner. This session of the state Legislature should be renamed, with all due respect to the carnage of the French Revolution, Alabama's Reign of Budgetary Terror.

Everything, everyone, is expendable.

Which, in the basic, logical sense, is true. If the governor's not getting paid, why should teachers or state-level law clerks or archivists get paid? If there's not enough money, the simplest solution is the quickest to make.

With fiscal reality as his guide, Bentley has trotted out the guillotine because the General Fund isn't merely weak; it's powerless to right itself, thanks to a devilish combination of a still-slushy economy and a state tax structure that doesn't produce enough revenue from those who can most afford it.

Neither Bentley nor the state's new Republican leadership, Rep. Mike Hubbard and Sen. Del Marsh, are dumb. They've seen the ledgers and the projections, which stink. It was no typo when the good doctor said budget cuts for next year might reach 45 percent. Forty-five percent. Do that math. Fortunately, a 15 percent cut will be enough.

This version of state government sees this calamity the way Sam Walton's heirs would see a precipitous drop in Wal-Mart receipts: With business bad, with projections tepid, with new revenue streams absent, it's time to slash costs and lay off employees and close unprofitable stores.

Problem is, state government isn't a business, where profit margins — and nothing else — rule the day.

Business principles have a place in state government. They're not anathema. The common-sense logic they provide is valuable, if not often AWOL, in Montgomery.

Yet, state government is ostensibly about the state and its people: their lives, their protection, their safety. There are items — like children's welfare and inspections of anything under state control — only government can provide, unless you outsource everything but legislators themselves. Eliminating those items saves money, but it hurts those they are designed to protect.

Without bravery to increase revenue — be it through taxes or some other method — Alabama is doomed to this sort of recurring calamity.

Earlier this week, Forrister, the Alabama Arise coordinator, described quite a scary scenario about the path this state is taking:

“Last week's budget hearings revealed a Forestry Commission that won't be as able to fight major fires; a Forensics Department that has to close regional labs that help solve crimes; an Agriculture Department that says it might not be able to provide an adequate response to an

outbreak of bird flu. Restaurant inspectors will check less often and hope compliance doesn't lag. The courts will schedule half as many civil jury trials and reduce criminal jury trials by a fourth; a backlog of justice will build until revenue improves.

“But I do know this: We can't cut our way to a better Alabama. We need a balanced approach that combines careful budget cuts with selected tax increases. We've done it before. With a commitment to responsible governance, we can do it again.”

Hmm, a “commitment to responsible governance.” That's where we are; that's the struggle we face. Some see that commitment as financial pruning in lean times. Others see that commitment as warding off future catastrophes with wise, bold planning. Yet, the balance espoused in Forrister's sermon is the sensible, humane way.

We all may soon carry these budget-cutting scars. But one thing's clear: The loser in this upheaval is Alabama's people. Who will speak for them?

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