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A stricter version of conservatism takes root

Jason Embry, Commentary

JASON EMBRY »



Updated: 5:19 a.m. Tuesday, May 17, 2011
Published: 7:41 p.m. Monday, May 16, 2011

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The 2011 legislative session is nearing its end, and the Republican-controlled body has struggled at times to find consensus on fixing the state's budget shortfall.

An important reason why a consensus has not been reached is that once-feasible options for fixing the budget have lost favor.

I've talked before in this space about the rainy day fund, a \$9 billion pot of money raised through oil and gas taxes. The Republican-majority Legislature and Gov. Rick Perry nearly emptied that fund to help fix a smaller budget shortfall in 2003. In 2005, Perry called for using it again to create the Emerging Technology Fund, which invests state dollars in startup technology companies and awards research grants to universities.

But this year, despite the fact that the fund contains billions more than it did in either of those years, and despite the fact that schools and other services face sizable spending cuts, Perry has said that the fund should not be used to balance the budget over the next two years.

Many lawmakers agree with him, which is why the House approved a budget that did not spend that money over the next two years and the Senate tried to do the same.

Also in 2003, the Legislature balanced the budget with deferrals, which allow lawmakers to shift payments to school districts or state agencies from the final days of one budget cycle into the first few days of the next cycle. Spending isn't actually reduced so much as it is pushed to the next balance sheet. This maneuver allowed the 2003 Legislature, for instance, to delay an \$800 million education payment, which the 2005 Legislature came back and repaid after the economy had improved.

Legislative leaders have proposed another education deferral this time. But several House conservatives have expressed concerns about supporting it, saying the state should not push costs to the next budget cycle.

The 2003 Legislature also used other tools, such as entering a multistate lottery and putting a fee on facilities for people with developmental disabilities, that don't seem to have much traction this time around.

So as the budget shortfall has grown larger, members of the Legislature seem to be adopting an increasingly strict definition of what it means to be a conservative. For this we can thank a number of factors, including the rise of the tea party and its successes in last November's elections, as well as the increasing prominence of interest groups such as Texans for Fiscal Responsibility, whose lawmaker scorecards can come quite in handy during a Republican primary.

Talmadge Heflin, the Republican chairman of the budget-writing Appropriations Committee in 2003, is now the director of the Center for Fiscal Policy at the small-government Texas Public Policy Foundation. The foundation isn't crazy about using the rainy day money over the next two years or deferring payments.

"We see a more dismal outlook for the national economy" than at this point in 2003, Heflin said, adding that he and colleagues also worry about how national health care reform will affect state Medicaid costs in coming years.

A hard-line approach against tricks that were more politically palatable in the past could force the Legislature to make spending

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cuts that are even more drastic.

Previous lawmakers were willing to use the rainy day fund and deferred payments to make spending cuts less severe. But that was before the tea party, before Perry rode an anti-spending wave to a GOP primary win and before most of us had heard of Barack Obama.

This is not 2003.

jembry@statesman.com; 445-3572

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loogrr Score: 2

11:21 AM on May 17, 2011 Report Abuse

"The Democracy will cease to work when Government takes from those who are willing to work and gives to those who are not" ...a quote from 200 some odd years ago by Thomas Jefferson

manup Score: 2

10:52 AM on May 17, 2011 Report Abuse

I have said it before and I will say it again. The question we should be asking is: when taken as a percentage, are we paying more of our income now, in taxes, than we were ten, twenty, thirty, forty years ago? I don't know the answer, but it surely needs to be asked often and answered with definition.

loogrr Score: 0

9:53 AM on May 17, 2011 Report Abuse

RACE CARD? you see RACISM in Conservatives wanting Fiscal sanity??...got news for you...the One who sees Color in every issue IS THE RACIST BIGOT...look in mirror MACAN

[1 reply](#)

mscan Score: 0

8:54 AM on May 17, 2011 Report Abuse

Let's not mince words anymore folks. This is class warfare. An older generation of mostly white people don't want "their money" going to an education system and social safety net that increasingly is filled with tan and brown skinned babies. One question for these folks: Who are going to be our future firemen, policemen, city workers, etc. Who will take care of the sick and mentally ill? And why are you so willing to deprive fellow citizens of the same benefits you enjoyed when you were young? Shame on all the misguided and misanthropic "Tea Party" and may you and your representatives in our government go back to the shadows where you belong after your 15 minutes is up.

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1 reply



TexasCattleCo

Score: 1

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8:41 AM on May 17, 2011

The right is trying to destroy public schools and safety nets for the poor. They haven't had the votes before this session. If Democrats and independents don't get rid of these right wingers in the next election we will be looking at a decimated public school system and more lower paying jobs in the out years.



bhaw k

Score: 6

Report Abuse

7:55 AM on May 17, 2011

This Leg session was not really about conservative fiscal policy it was about using the budget as the tool for conservative social engineering. Not really new. But the tenacity of the attacks on some things seem over the top. More like a cleansing of society's safety nets in the name of anti-socialism. We gained no freedom, ended no injustice, created no jobs. Looks like a failure.

1 reply



Miss Claire

Score: 5

Report Abuse

7:37 AM on May 17, 2011

I wonder if these conservative think tanks will also report on the increases in county/city taxes and tuition at state supported universities?

The state budget may have been reduced, but the cost for services are now passed on to local entities. People without insurance or options will wind up in an emergency room. Students loan debt has now exceeded credit card debt in our nation, and it is rising every year. Local school districts will cobble together whatever plans keep the doors open with larger classes and fewer options for students.

As a nation, state, and local community, we demand services from our government and the most politically active groups (such as seniors) have the fewest cuts. There is no real fiscal change, just a passing on of responsibility so claims can be made at the next election cycle. So don't blame your county commissioners when your taxes rise, your kids classes are packed, and you have to wait even longer in the ER. We can thank the lege and the voters who drank the tea for these results.



loogr

Score: -7

Report Abuse

4:45 AM on May 17, 2011

the last election was about shrinking government and that is exactly what lawmakers are doing...KUDOS for sticking with promises, you will be rewarded in next election with RE-election...the SPEND FRENZY days on way to becoming ancient history...a return to FISCAL SANITY is the future that TEXANS said they wanted...so scream to high heaven but TEXANS are fed up and want less gov't, less taxes, more freedom... what's so wrong with that ?????...

4 replies


Barrymtn

Score: 5


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12:34 AM on May 17, 2011

A stricter version of conservatism takes...




Conservatives have never like the public education system, nor any kind of public funded health care program. They have taken this opportunity to harm public schools and cut healthcare programs for the poor, women and children. This attack on schools, health care, and the rights of workers to is occurring in many of the states run by republicans. They of course, don't want to give up their socialized health care or lucrative retirement system, they just don't want the rest of Texans to have the same.



[BobbyDocDuvallier](#) Score: 4
9:40 PM on May 16, 2011 [Report Abuse](#)


"A stricter version of conservatism takes root"
Would that happen to be called fascism?

[4 replies](#)




[BobbyDocDuvallier](#) Score: 4
9:37 PM on May 16, 2011 [Report Abuse](#)

What kind of a milquetoast/soggy-cornflakes restatement of obviousness do you get paid for at the Statesman? Seriously, I read all the way through and wanted to smack myself repeatedly for not guessing how repetitive and dull this was going to turn out. Why don't you write something about how all these pretend populists have been coopted by big business. Go out and read some of Jim Hightower's latest stuff before you do another opinion piece.



[kgerlach](#) Score: 3
8:34 PM on May 16, 2011 [Report Abuse](#)

So in short- cut all the traditional programs serving Jane and Joe, and instead spend money on those exciting new projects feeding consultants and investors! (of course, only those, that contribute). This is Chicago 1930 2.0- and happens right here in Texas!



[Davebuoy](#) Score: -2
8:29 PM on May 16, 2011 [Report Abuse](#)

Stop your freakin spending. Just stop it. Quit blowing every dollar you get, and then some.

[1 reply](#)

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