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COMMENTARY

Donn Esmonde: Another reformer goes astray

By Donn Esmonde
News Columnist

Another one bites the dust. You hate to see it happen. But as sure as sunrise, the political system takes reformers and — with rare exception — pounds them into politics-as-usual pulp. Sometimes it takes a while. Sometimes it happens fast. In the end, the result is almost always the same: They turn into the thing that they once condemned.

The latest public official misshapen by the pressures of a political culture is Satish Mohan. The UB professor was — without major-party backing — elected Amherst supervisor three years ago on a promise of change. If a recent stance is any indication, one thing that has changed is his reformist ways.

The latest litmus test for local politicians is self-downsizing. Civic leader Kevin Gaughan's recent study showed we have more politicians than Idaho has potatoes. It costs us in tax dollars, in bureaucracy and in blurred leadership.

Gaughan's remedy: Have the county's 41 town and village boards downsize by two members apiece. Instead of forcing it down anyone's throat, Gaughan wants each town and village board to let citizens vote on the question. It has been easier said than done. With a few exceptions, politicians in every village and town have refused to let people vote on the size of their government.

Gaughan's road show recently hit the wall in Amherst. The board voted, 4-3, to deny residents the right to decide for themselves. Leading the charge against change was the so-called reformer, Mohan.

He told The Buffalo News the downsizing effort was a "convergence to dictatorship."

Geez, I thought that dictatorship involved denying people a say in their own government. Thanks for the clarification, King Satish.

The screenshot shows the Buffalo News website interface. At the top, there's a search bar and navigation links. Below that, a 'Gusto search results' section displays a calendar for August 2008. A large, stylized advertisement for 'GUSTO CALENDAR ONLINE' is prominently featured, with a mouse cursor pointing at it. The ad includes text about 'Gusto' being a 'What you want, when you want it.' service and provides the website 'www.BuffaloNews.com'.

“I hoped that [Mohan] would be part of the solution,” Gaughan said, “not part of the problem.”

I do not care whether Mohan thinks Amherst’s board should be cut from seven members to five. What matters is he does not believe that people have a right to decide for themselves. This is Amherst, not Iran.

Mohan said that cutting two board members only saves the town \$70,000 annually (plus benefits) which does not qualify as downsizing.

“My fear is that people are very innocent and will vote for anything presented as downsizing,” Mohan said. “Who will educate them, before it goes to a vote?”

I do not know which is worse, Mohan’s belief that people are too naive to grasp the issue or his refusal to place it in their hands.

In fairness, a learning curve comes with political newcomers. Some of the idealism gets knocked out, as they run headlong into roadblocks to change. But true reformers adjust their focus without losing their aim.

According to Gaughan, only 4 percent of the state’s 932 towns have as many as Amherst’s seven members. Cutting to five would bring Amherst in line. Mohan said a few months ago that he wanted citizens to decide the board-downsizing question for themselves.

A couple of things changed between now and then, other than Mohan’s mind. His switch to the Democratic Party becomes official Jan. 1. He is running for re-election next year and wants the party’s endorsement. Pushing for fewer politicians is not the road to party boss Len Lenihan’s heart.

“That is not my motive,” Mohan claimed. “There are no politics in this.”

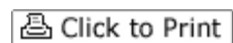
Mohan’s latest budget included such mini-reforms as tax cuts and job mergers. But denying people a voice on downsizing shows the degree to which this guy has been politicized.

From a man of the people to just another politician. I hate when that happens.

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