

Editorials

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StarTribune

CHRISTOPHER M. HARTE, Publisher and Chairman
SCOTT GILLESPIE, Editor, Editorial Pages

Resolution needed in AG controversy

- Nonpartisan inquiry should probe ethics allegations.

In the turmoil now swirling around the Minnesota attorney general's office, no one should question Lori Swanson's expertise or her work ethic. Before her election in 2006, Minnesota's top lawyer spent years as former AG Mike Hatch's top gun. Her consumer-protection work — cracking down on predatory lenders, health insurers' wasteful spending and financial firms that target the elderly — continues to benefit a wide range of Minnesotans.



State Attorney General Lori Swanson's office has been hit with allegations of mismanagement and potentially unethical behavior.

But as union advocates battle to organize the DFLer's staff, disturbing allegations have surfaced about mismanagement and potentially unethical behavior. We respect Swanson's concerns that these may be politically motivated attacks or retaliation by anonymous disgruntled employees. But her office has immense power; it can compel a company to turn over its most sensitive records, or make front-page charges of fraud. If there are questions about the office's integrity, those questions need to be resolved.

It's time for independent review by a respected nonpartisan broker — we suggest Legislative Auditor James Nobles — to clear the air.

The year has already yielded an example of how valuable such a review can be. In January, Nobles' office put an end to a months long controversy involving Secretary of State Mark Ritchie, clearing him of using office contacts to solicit campaign contributions.

Swanson acknowledged in an interview this week the "radioactive" effect that even raising ethics violations has in the legal world. And in a Feb. 19 e-mail, she wrote that the turmoil threatened to "undermine the work of this office."

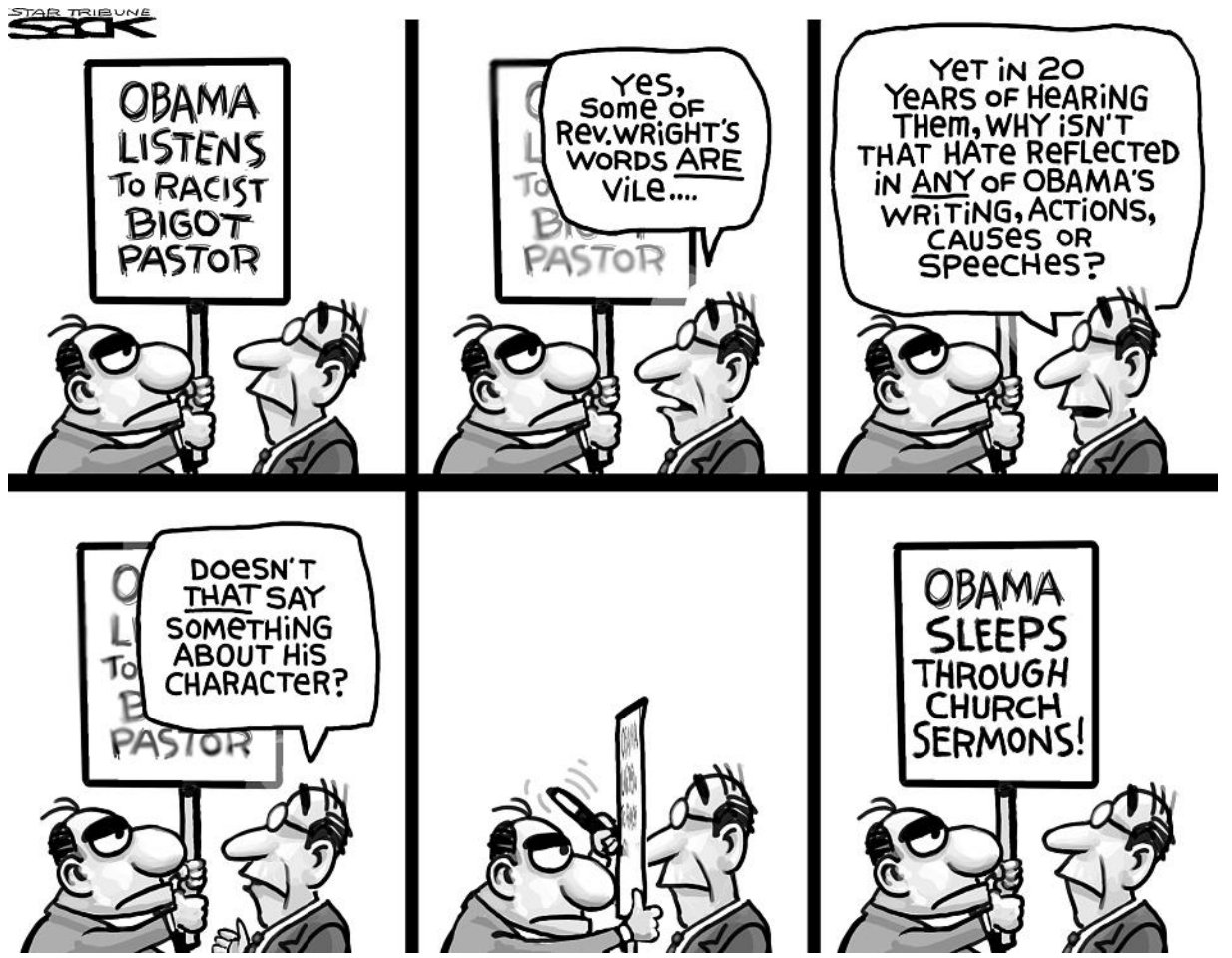
Given that, she should welcome

an outside review to address the allegations. Among them: that the impulse to sue preceded a finding of wrongdoing; that consumer statements were tampered with, and that pro-union employees were targeted for termination.

An independent review should also examine attorney turnover. According to Swanson, 49 attorneys have left since she was elected, out of a staff of 155 to 160, for a turnover rate of about 30 percent. Swanson contends that private firms have similar attrition and that a higher number, 54, left during Hatch's first 15 months. Hatch, however, fired most; under Swanson, most left voluntarily. And just to compare: After the last election, the Hennepin County attorney's office had 11 percent turnover.

Unlike politically appointed officeholders, Swanson must answer to the voters. She should be given wide latitude in running the office. She can hire bright young attorneys, as she has. She can listen to the advice of outside legal opinion that the law prohibits unionizing her attorneys.

Ultimately, Swanson and her critics want the same thing: a fair resolution and an office that functions at its best. An independent review will help end the rancor and let the office focus on its most important client: the citizens of Minnesota.



Readers Write

PALLIATIVE CARE Opting for less

I've always thought a reporter's job was to inform and educate people, and the March 16 article "Moving beyond 'more is better,'" does that quite well. It points out some of the ills of our health-care system, and informs people of an option for health care they may have not know about.

I've seen too many examples in my own life and in other people's lives of doctors recommending tests, surgeries and treatments for various ailments (mostly cancer) that may not have been necessary, or even useful. This drives up doctor's bills and costs to the insurance companies, not to mention to the patients when insurance doesn't cover all of the costs.

It is up to the patient to say "enough is enough" and stop the escalating "care" for chronic diseases or terminal illnesses, and it's great to have another choice in the health-care arena. Thank you for publishing that article.

CARLENE DEAN, Villard, Minn.

Keep up the good work

Josephine Marcotty's piece was poignant and personal. It was powerful because of the policy ramifications. The online audio slideshow added to the impact.

This is important health policy journalism. We need more like it.

GARY SCHWITZER, St. Paul

Doc-patient relations

Josephine Marcotty's article speaks eloquently for all patients and their families who want to be in control of their medical decisions. We do need to change from paying for medical procedures and tests to rewarding quality clinician-patient relationships.

Good doctor-patient relationships are grounded in ongoing discussions about a patient's stages of life and illness while always respecting patient and family preferences and decisions. Death is the final "outcome" for us all, so the quality of our medical care depends on embracing life and death in a dignified way. Patients and their families should shop for well-trained doctors and clinicians who understand this.

As citizens, we need to discourage current legislative health-care reform proposals that subordinate patient decisionmaking to the control of insurance companies and large medical organizations. Patient-centered care means escape from arbitrary insurance company or clinic "medical necessity" payment and service denials, restrictive provider networks and "pay-for-performance" bonuses to clinicians that are often hidden from patients and their families.

LEE BEECHER, M.D., Maple Grove; past president, Minnesota Physician-Patient Alliance

TIM PAWLENTY'S MNDOT Outsourcing at its worst

Regarding your March 16 front-page article "Bridge building, image-making go hand in hand": The Pawlenty administration is a disgrace. First it hired an outside consulting firm to evaluate the Interstate 35W bridge, then it ignored the firm's advice that the bridge was unsafe and needed repair and chose the cheaper option of just watching the bridge until it fell.

DAVID FAUCHER, Minnetonka

LETTER OF THE DAY

A hopeful future for Jewish-Catholic relations

Regarding the Rev. Michael O'Connell's March 20 letter ("Latin mass and the Jews"), the Jewish community appreciates deeply the millions of Catholics who recognize the eternal covenantal relationship between Jews and God as illustrated by O'Connell's dedication to Jewish-Catholic relations. This dedication is poignantly reflected by the commissioning of the Basilica of St. Mary of the Holocaust Memorial Oratorio: To Be Certain of the Dawn. The oratorio itself is written in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Nazi death camps and the 40th anniversary of Nostra Aetate ("In Our Times"), the document from the Second Vatican Council which condemned blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus.

Jewish tradition teaches that the longest journey begins with but a single step and happily the Catholic Church, locally and internationally, has moved forward a great distance in addressing its past relationship with Jews and Judaism making for a hopeful future — which one step in a different direction cannot change.

STEVE HUNEGS, executive director, Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas

Now it looks like the selection of the firm to build a new bridge was rigged from the get-go. And the \$550,000 paid to a Pawlenty buddy's public relations firm to make the governor look good is outrageous! Why not let MnDOT bridge inspectors do their jobs and let MnDOT spokeswoman Lucy Kender give monthly updates on how construction is going?

This is government outsourcing at its worst. And you can bet that when the GOP convention comes to town, your outsourcing governor will be preening and posing by the new bridge, hoping that no one remembers his role in the collapse of the 35W bridge just last year.

JOHN DALSVEN, Brook Park, Minn.

POLITICAL ADVICE For Al Franken

"Whatever happened to starting small?" by Lawrence R. Jacobs (Opinion Exchange, March 16) is great advice, not only for the politically minded but anyone starting on a chosen career path. I find it quite humorous, though, that Al Franken could well have been substituted for Mike Ciresi as the example of political inexperience he cites. "Former satirist and radio talk show host" don't even come close to "sterling résumé as an attorney" as far as fitness for political office, in my opinion. Even Jesse Ventura had established leadership qualities as a suburban high school coach and mayor before becoming governor.

Maybe Al could set his sights on an elected office in St. Louis Park since he was born there. Or better yet, a similar town in New York, since he spent most of his life there. Jacobs' quasi-endorsement of Sen. Norm Coleman is noted.

DAVID FAUCHER, Minnetonka

For voters

Larry Jacobs is wrong. The last thing we need in politics is more career politicians. We need people who are focused on getting things done.

ERIC SCHUBERT, Inver Grove Heights

A sterling résumé

I agree with Lawrence R. Jacobs about the lack of political experience for someone wanting to run for U.S. Senate. I prefer someone who worked 17 years for the state attorney general's office and was mayor of St. Paul for eight years. That sure beats a comedian and former talk show host.

GARY FISCHBACH, St. Paul



IN-STATE TUITION Parent-status aside

With all the opposition to the Dream Act, I wonder: When did we begin punishing children for the crimes of their parents?

The children of murderers are able to get in-state tuition rates. Why are the children of those who came here to create a better life not worthy of the same treatment?

NICHOLAS DAVIS, Minneapolis

GUNS AND BUTTER The same costly stew

When I hear people say they think the economy is overtaking the Iraq war as the most important issue this year, I wonder how they are missing the point.

Just imagine how our economy would be doing if we were spending \$12 billion monthly at home, instead of sending warmongers laughing all the way to the bank. For after all, we taxpayers know we're spending our resources, but how many of us know who the buyers are?

LARRY ANDERSON, Hopkins

30 YEARS LATER 55 still looks wise

Why in this time of record trade deficits and rising energy prices, has no one mentioned reducing the speed limit to 55 miles per hour like we did in the early 1970s? This would reduce the oil demand by millions of gallons a day. It would also reduce pollution which should be a concern in today's world where being "green" is stressed every day.

STEVE OLSON, Sturgeon Lake, Minn.

WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS?

We welcome your participation, whether in letters or articles for the opinion pages.

We prefer submissions by e-mail to opinion@startribune.com. Otherwise please mail to Editorial Department, Star Tribune, 425 Portland Av., Minneapolis MN 55488. Fax: 612-673-4359.

Submissions must be exclusive to us in Minnesota. All must include the writer's name, address, occupation and phone numbers (work and home). Letters and Counterpoints become the property of the Star Tribune, and may be republished in any format. Letters should be brief, up to 250 words. Articles must be less than 700 words. Because of the volume of mail, we cannot return manuscripts.

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

Statewide smoking ban gave no thought to mental health

- Theater night protests are a challenge to a mean-spirited, shortsighted law.

Your March 16 editorial panned our Theater Night performances in bars as "a clever but wrongheaded protest" against Minnesota's smoking ban and sniffed that this is a medical, not economic, issue. We disagree. Your editorial focused on physical health and made no room for mental health.

After the smoking ban took effect Oct. 1, many small bars, Legions and VFW posts experienced a precipitous drop in income. Bar owners laid off waitresses they had known since childhood. Bartenders quit school after losing hours and tips. Former customers retreated to ice shacks on frozen Minnesota lakes to drink and smoke alone.

Public health is more than physical health — clean air and pink lungs. It is also about mental health — keeping company and green wallets. People who drink and smoke alone, who lose their jobs and businesses do not live as well or as long. They need help, not ridicule. These people are socially isolated and financially stressed. Social and financial health deserves to be part of our public health discussion.

Public health pundits grumble that Theater Night disrespects the law and violates its "spirit." But this law is mean-spirited and disrespects our veterans and small-bar owners. It makes

no accommodation for them.

Last spring, the veterans and small bar owners worried they would lose customers. The Legislature assured them they would see more customers when their businesses were smoke-free, a rosy prediction that turned out wrong.

Theater Night is a blessed respite from the economic desert in which some of our small bars were dying. We now have time to address the mistaken assumptions of last spring. We recommend two healthy accommodations for our veterans and small bar owners.

First, our veterans deserve an exemption. They performed valiantly overseas and continue to perform for their communities through charitable giving. But their revenues dried up after Oct. 1. Granting them an exemption will restore those revenues and their charitable giving.

Second, the smoking ban lets scientists study the effects of tobacco smoke as long as their laboratories are ventilated at the rate of 60 cubic feet of air per minute per person. This is a safety standard that our small bar owners are willing to adopt, even at great cost. Granting such an exemption will give them a chance of survival.

Some may be upset by our approach. But all we ask is to be heard on the subject of mental health as an integral component of public health. Until that day, our show will go on.

Mark W. Benjamin is a criminal-defense attorney in Cambridge, Minn.