

Editorial: Sour Grapes

June, 2002

Oregonians must have felt a little bit like Venezuelans on election night this May, because never were so many coups attempted so unsuccessfully.

Oregon has the highest unemployment rate in the nation, and its tax and regulatory climate make the state an uncompetitive place to do business, which is why business owners and opinion leaders have known for some time that this state is in trouble, real trouble. Maybe that's why business leaders took this election so seriously and made a number of attempts to transfer power away from Oregon's professional political class and the institutional rot they've built up over 16 years.

Failed Coup #1: Business leaders took on the GOP party establishment and three failed legislative sessions when they supported the candidacy of Ron Saxton. For much of the month the plan looked brilliant and Saxton seemed on the verge of pulling off the impossible. The three Democrat candidates even picked up the threads of his pro-business themes in their primary. But then Saxton's liberal positions on social issues leaked out and hurt his campaign at a critical moment. Was Elaine Franklin's influence too strong?

Failed Coup #2: Property owners once again took a stand against the most aggressive central planning in the nation when Oregonians In Action put Measure 26-11--to repeal Metro's density requirements—on the ballot. For a time during the campaign even Portland's liberal weekly Willamette Week was questioning the planners' agenda...“the sanctity of farmland may be misguided...and adding more light-rail lines can't solve all the traffic problems.” But after a coordinated blitz by local government officials, the measure failed.

Failed Coup #3: Status-quo educational leaders felt the heat from Rob Kremer's campaign for Superintendent of Public Instruction. Kremer supporters hoped to take the conversation about education in Oregon beyond the mind-numbing platitudes of “more money,” and “standards,” and “class size.” Meanwhile, Kremer's opponent, Susan Castillo, was ridiculed by both Willamette Week and The Oregonian. Amazingly enough, in spite of their doubts and outright ridicule, The Oregonian sheepishly endorsed Castillo. The result: Kremer finished ahead of Bunn but lost to Castillo. Hopes for a brighter future at Oregon's Department of Ed. are dashed. Hopes for a better dialogue remain possible, but delayed. This was, perhaps, the most disturbing race this primary season. After all the whining about our education “crisis” and talk of looking for fresh ideas, new leadership and smart resourceful new candidates, these same institutional minds snubbed the best prospect for responsible change in our education doldrums the state has seen in years—

Rob Kremer. Instead they stayed with the safe institutional bet, the easy way out—Susan Castillo, who they said, “shows no independent thinking from the teachers’ unions that support her. On most education issues, Castillo has not moved beyond the soundbite—and that’s insulting to educators and the public alike.” But endorse her they did.

Willamette Week said, “We have rarely interviewed a mainstream candidate so unprepared and unconvincing.” At least they had the courage to endorse someone else.

Failed Coup #4: Ethics advocates and U.S. Constitution defenders fought the political anointing of David Schuman for Oregon's Court of Appeals by running property rights lawyer Dave Hunnicutt. Schuman’s legal conduct, a weak defense of Measure 7 in the state attorney general's office and his mulligan for a tardy voter’s pamphlet statement, raised questions about a political double standard being permanently etched in Oregon's judiciary system. In the end, Governor Kitzhaber and University of Oregon President Dave Frohnmayer cut a TV commercial attempting to polish Schuman’s questionable legal reputation. The result: Schuman defeated Hunnicutt. Or was it Kitzhaber/Frohnmayer who defeated him?

Failed Coup #5: Downtown real estate owners and neighborhood activists tried to realign the power grid at Portland City Hall with The Good Government Initiative. Portland Tribune columnist Phil Stanford derisively referred to opponents of the initiative as “the white wine and Volvo set, spearheaded by Commissioner Charlie ‘Skateboard’ Hales, who likes to keep things the way they are.” For a time the idea of reforming City Hall captured the imagination of many. But the Mayor and the four sitting commissioners discovered a technical flaw in the writing of Robert Ball’s measure—that was enough to burst the reformer’s public relations bubble. The result: The Good Government Initiative lost badly.

ELECTION SCOREBOARD:

Coups Attempted: 5

Coups Accomplished: 0

Voters cast their ballots against change on Primary day, but it is a rare election when business leaders work as hard as they did in this election cycle to wrestle power from the professional political class. Moreover, the message sent from business owners was not that they were attempting to wrestle power from the governing class for their own self-interest, but rather because they were concerned about the general state of disrepair in Oregon. The election results showed that voters may not realize the state is in trouble, but business owners and other opinion leaders think the state is very much in trouble. Sometime soon the “real world” bottom-line problems business owners are having will “trickle down” to voters, and maybe then the public will be more engaged, and have a greater desire for change. One way or another, a message is being sent. Voters don’t have to listen...yet.

THE SOUREST GRAPES...

(Comments made post-primary to The Oregonian)

Metro President Mike Burton crowing about the loss of Measure 26-11, offered this arrogant, elitist comment, "I feel good about the fact that we whipped them this time. One of the pleasing aspects of this win is taking these people and showing them for who they are." Is Burton referring to the 105,515 voters who said yes to the measure? The people he represents?

Elaine Franklin, who the day after her campaign for Ron Saxton lost, threw a public temper tantrum, abandoned the Republican Party, and declared that a lobbyist who had challenged Saxton's positions should, "butt out of this race or don't knock on my door again."