

POINTS OF VIEW

Score a couple points for Detroit school board chair Hendrix

It ain't necessarily so. Things seldom are what they appear. The things that you're liable to read in the Bible - they ain't necessarily so.

In the aftermath of last week's failed search for a CEO for the Detroit schools, you'd think Michigan Treasurer Mark Murray is at the very best a racist puppet in Gov. John Engler's scheme to deny the citizens of Detroit their civil and political rights.

Here's a sample, attributed by the Detroit Free Press to Wayne County Commissioner Bernard Parker: "Mark Murray doesn't understand a community that fought for its rights. I feel like a slave; I feel like my master just told me what to do." (Wild applause.)

What all the fuss is about, of course, is Murray's vote against Dr. John Thompson to be the new school CEO. As Gov. Engler's representative (and, as such, given veto power over selection of the CEO by the legislature that created the appointed board), Murray thought Dr. Thompson's career showed no measurable improvement in academic performance. The vote was 5-1 for Thompson, so Thompson lost.

The whole episode is a perfect illustration that surface appearances in

complex political events seldom provide much insight into what's really going on.

Before I get to that, however, I want to set the record clear about Mark Murray. I've known Mark, now 46, for years, just as I knew both his parents. He doesn't have a racist bone in his body. In fact, he's one of the most principled, moral people I know.

His distinguished career in public service included hitching with Govs. William Milliken (moderate Republican) and James Blanchard (moderate Democrat) before becoming state treasurer and chief policy adviser to John Engler. Over the years, Murray has become one of the most respected people in Lansing, admired and liked by politicians and bureaucrats alike.

So how does somebody as smart and experienced as Mark Murray get involved in what looks like a very embarrassing train wreck?

In the first place, why didn't Murray signal to his colleagues on the board that he couldn't support Thompson before things got to the 5-1 vote/veto that exposed the board's disarray in public and set at risk any subsequent search?

In a conversation last weekend,



PHILIP POWER

Murray told me he made it clear he didn't favor Thompson from the start. He was prepared to let Thompson be on a short list of four candidates (all black, incidentally) in hopes that the

search firm would provide evidence that students in districts led by him improved their test scores. No such evidence was forthcoming, and so Murray voted against Thompson because "anyone coming to Detroit schools as CEO should show proven success in the core mission of the enterprise - to improve academic performance."

So what really happened?

First, the search firm engaged by the board, H.C. Smith, really screwed up. Asked to suggest "non traditional candidates" (i.e. people with business or military backgrounds but demonstrated leadership skills), they offered up educators only. Moreover, it turns out the firm's background checks on

the candidates it did suggest were inadequate.

Second - and this is an informed guess on my part - it looks like the majority of the board decided to play an early game of chicken to see if Murray would blink. He didn't. Now the board can get on with its work with a clearer understanding of whose spine is stiff.

The third factor has to do with Detroit deputy mayor and school board chair Freeman Hendrix. Hendrix is smart, energetic and ambitious. It's no secret that he's interested in taking Mayor Dennis Archer's place when the time comes. And the highly publicized events and complex racial politics surrounding the search for a new CEO for the Detroit schools are a perfect place for a smart, ambitious politician to do his stuff.

In a radio interview after the vote, Gov. Engler charged Hendrix with being too narrowly focused on trying to find an "African-American" CEO. Hendrix responded that the law giving the governor's representative veto power over the board majority was the equivalent of former Alabama Gov. George Wallace standing in the schoolhouse door.

Score one for Hendrix in publicly standing up to Gov. Engler.

Last week the board in a relatively sane and productive meeting decided to conduct a new search, using a new search firm.

"We're back on track," said Murray, who added that "I believe that being African American would give a candidate a substantial advantage in being an effective CEO. I would expect that the final results would yield an African American leader for the Detroit schools."

So score two for Freeman Hendrix in setting the stage for a unanimous vote of the board he chairs to hire a (presumably) capable school CEO whose ethnicity is a plus with the voters in the city he hopes to lead.

It isn't what it looks like on the surface, but it's not bad for a couple of weeks' work.

Philip Power is chairman of Home Town Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 963-3047, ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@homecomm.net

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Applaud the council

The culmination of city council meetings and recent newspaper articles concerning the bird feeding ordinance have compelled me to comment on the subject. However, it was the Jan. 20 Observer "Letter to the Editor" that really hit a nerve.

I wonder if the residents who find this ordinance and appear to be making a joke of the council for even considering implementing such a thing, would feel the same way if they had ever been unfortunate enough to suffer from histoplasmosis, a serious fungal lung disease; the result of inhaling airborne spores from the droppings of certain birds, in particular, Canada geese. Believe me, it's no day

at the beach, and had it not been in my case, for a very bright pulmonary doctor who detected my condition, I would have been under the care of a team of doctors who believed I had lung cancer. That's how serious the condition is and life threatening if not diagnosed. And even more devastating and dangerous if contracted by a child.

In addition to being a health risk, there is a litany of other behaviors Canada geese are capable of imposing. However, examples of what I personally sustained include: chewing my roof, biting my dog countless times, biting my daughter, literally attacking me and making my backyard unusable. These birds have evolved to the degree

where they are no longer migrating and are now able to endure frigid conditions, which I have witnessed year after year of observing them remain in my back yard all winter. They have become increasingly aggressive, and not solely during mating season.

I think the residents who are upset that their children will no longer be able to feed the geese and ducks should consider how much more their children would be "traumatized" if they were struck with any of the diseases that these birds carry and the recovery process that follows. While unfortunate, the risk of contracting a disease is what accompanies an abundance of an animal that is a carrier, and very dominating.

As the naturalist, who was kind enough to speak at the council meeting on Jan. 10 stated, the ducks are not the problem that the geese are. They expel their droppings in the water, unlike the geese, and are not aggressive in nature and are geese.

I am an animal lover in favor of animal rights. However, when the rights of animals infringe and endanger the rights of humans, simple logic implies that laws and restrictions need to be executed. I applaud the decisions and stand the council has finally taken on this issue and am thrilled that they have not backed down.

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