

No end to arrogance from Speaker Denney

Jim Fisher
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April 3, nearly a month before the Idaho House declared this year's legislative session over and went home, only to be jerked back to Boise by the state constitution four days later, Speaker Lawrence Denney received legislation passed by a unanimous Senate and single-handedly killed it.

The legislation dealt with ethics - ethics of legislators, among other public officials.

Denney said the bill, which bolstered the state's campaign disclosure law by requiring elected officials and candidates for elected office to disclose sources - but not amounts - of their income, was the product of negotiations between the Senate and Gov. Butch Otter, "but the House wasn't included."

"I think it's an issue that's not ripe on the House side yet," he said in explaining why he failed to assign it to any committee for examination.

Really? Since when does the House include senators in drafting the bills it passes and sends to the other chamber? And when was the last time a Senate leader declared a bill passed overwhelmingly by the House not ripe enough to be considered in that chamber?

Something is ripe, overripe actually, in the House, but it's not legislation. It is the attitude by Denney and his fellow House leaders that they are the ringmasters of the circus into which they have turned the legislative branch. They decide which issues are decided in the House, to the point that committee chairmen have to ask Majority Leader Mike Moyle whether to hold hearings on certain bills. And they decide there will be no compromise with the governor of their own party or with the Senate dominated by members of their own party.

As this was written, Denney and his cohorts were continuing to resist repeated attempts by Otter and the Senate to find common ground on needed maintenance of state highways and bridges. And they continued to declare unilaterally that the Legislature's business is completed.

The Idaho Constitution disagrees. It says the session's business is completed only when both chambers say it is, and vote to adjourn. And until legislators and voters together decide to amend it, the constitution gets the last word.

That isn't the only thing Denney isn't clear on, either. Asked about the missing disclosure bill by the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Z. Russell, he said House members might take a look at it between sessions.

"Maybe during the interim some House members will get together and decide what they can live with in a bill like that," he said.

There is already a procedure for House members to do that. It's called the committee system, under which members hear from interests supporting and opposing legislation before debating and voting on it.

And it's done at scheduled meetings, with the public watching. Disclosure, in another word - a word Denney apparently has little use for. - J.F.