

Restoring Faith in the Legislature Requires Rooting Out Conflicts of Interest

Bill Hansell

Senator Hansell represents Willamette, Union, Umatilla, Morrow, Gilliam, Sherman, and parts of Wasco Counties.

I recently introduced Senate Bill 865 and it has generated some controversy. The bill is about rooting out conflicts of interest in our government, but I wanted to provide my constituents with what I hope is helpful background.

One fundamental American ideal is checks and balances. Oregon's government, which is elected and governed by The People, must not only protect the rights of Oregonians, but must also have their trust. In regards to trust, our representative democracy needs all the help it can get. Polling shows that faith in our government is at an all-time low.

Principles of checks and balances are intended to root out conflicts of interest in our elected officials. In the words of James Madison, the author of the American Constitution, "ambition must be made to counteract ambition."

One way the Oregon Constitution seeks to counteract ambition is by prohibiting elected officials from holding multiple offices at one time. According to Article 3 Section 1 of Oregon's Constitution, as a state senator, I cannot also serve as a county commissioner at the same time, nor can the Governor serve as the Attorney General, and judges cannot be state representatives. The goal of this is to ensure that different people are carrying out different parts of our government. If one person was controlling all aspects of our government, we would call that tyranny.

However, the Constitution is silent if elected leaders can also lead their political party as elected officers. While currently legal, the same ethical and practical concerns apply. Political parties are tasked with fundraising to help their candidates get elected. Yet, elected statewide leaders make policy that directly influences elections, campaign finance, and even the structure of the political parties themselves. If political party leaders are also elected to public office, they can too easily change the rules of the game to benefit themselves. That's called

corruption, and one of my goals as a Republican official is to ensure that the Republican Party avoids all appearances of corruption.

There has long been an understanding that there should be a separation between the “People’s Work,” which we are sent to Salem to do as elected officials, and political party politics. That is why we for example, cannot use taxpayer dollars for our campaigns.

As a lawmaker, one of my primary responsibilities is to ensure that my constituents trust their government. I want every Oregonian, regardless of political ideology, to have faith, that conflicts of interest, do not have the final say on the laws that govern them. Without that fundamental trust, we do not have a government by, for, and of The People.

This is why I introduced Senate Bill 865. The law would prohibit an elected official to state office (Governor, Secretary of State, state legislators, etc.) from simultaneously being an elected officer on a political party's state central committee. This bill would codify neutral standards of transparency and accountability.

I have been contacted by several of my constituents who are concerned about potential conflicts of interest among the current Oregon Republican Party leadership. Let me be clear: this bill is not about individuals. It's about establishing clear ethical boundaries to which all political parties can agree.

I can only imagine the rightful outrage from my Republican constituents if Kate Brown controlled both the state government and the flow of millions of campaign dollars as chair of the Democrat Party central committee. That would be a clear problem. While we are nowhere near that point yet, we needn't wait for such obvious abuse of power.

As your Senator, I feel a deep responsibility to make our government as transparent and accountable to “We The People” as possible. That sometimes means doing things that some in my own party won’t like, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t the right thing to do.