

Gimme some of yours and I'll give you some of mine

Written by Wauneta Breeze
Wednesday, 17 December 2008 21:55 -

By Ed Howard

Did you see the recent story about Gov. Heineman and the budget? The gist of it was that the next state budget will be more, rather than less, problematic.

If you pay any attention to what goes on in America, as it applies to Nebraska and every other state, you know that the governor's assertion is not what news people would regard as bulletin material.

Here is the interesting thing. When government is up against it for money, it would seem that what might be a majority of the people get what they want — philosophically. That is, less government spending.

What could be better?

The collective majority, however, will not make its voice heard in any particular way when the 2008 Legislature goes to work in January. What will be heard? The voices of those who represent others who need, or purport to need, or truly need, government services. You know the old thing about the citizenry having the "Not in my backyard!" attitude toward government.

That is to say, no prisons, halfway houses, facilities for the mentally disabled, or challenged, or whatever your preferred politically correct term might be.

There is a counterpart to that mantra. When it comes to cutting government spending, the mantra from many, many quarters is "Not my program!"

Such insistence will come from specific interests. Interesting, as previously promised, is that many of those who have specific interests in spending are usually, in other circumstances, part of the majority outcry for reduced spending in general.

Spending on what you regard as worthwhile is what you regard as good government. Spending that you don't regard as worthwhile is, predictably, that which you see as government excess.

The view from here: The very best example of this phenomenon was demonstrated when the late Rep. Virginia Smith was in Congress, representing the 3rd District in particular, but agriculture in general.

A particular county, not in her district but nonetheless agricultural in nature, saw its county board approve a resolution dropping its participation in what amounts to a federal program that provides surplus free cheese and other agricultural commodities to poor folks.

Mrs. Smith was on the phone like a good farm dog on a would-be chicken rustler. She strenuously emphasized to the locals that the program in question was an agricultural program, not an urban-oriented thing for those, among others, who then-President Reagan labeled "welfare queens."

If government programs didn't make use of immeasurable amounts of food, Mrs. Smith noted, there would be surpluses, and lower prices for commodities, and ... she need not have said more.

If policymakers — the governor and a legislative majority — really reduce government spending, not just hold it even but actually reduce it — they can count on catching hell and hardnosed lobbying on behalf of potentially bereaved interests.

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Here is a bit of government process that is little noted but particularly pertinent in what passes for hard times: Some interest groups will join forces, and their lobbyists will combine forces to deliver votes for one another.

One senator is big on supporting Program A, another's constituents want Program B. That's when what might be the oldest rule of politics (a word derived from policy) comes into play. That is: "Gimmee some of yours and I'll give you some of mine."

What's given, or traded? Votes for programs, which is to say votes for spending.

A reminder is in order here. Don't fall into the ridiculous silliness of complaining about the power of lobbyists. Lobbyists are just people who represent interest groups. Lobbyists don't have power — interest groups have power.

Their representatives, lobbyists, just carry their wishes to the Legislature.

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