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# Democrat Chief on Weak Moral Ground

Richard E. Day

*Eastern Kentucky University, richard.day@eku.edu*

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## DEMOCRAT CHIEF ON WEAK MORAL GROUND

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Author: Richard Day

Is it just me, or are there other registered Democrats who want to scratch the blackboard every time state Democratic Party Chair Jerry Lundergan is asked to comment regarding the hiring scandal in Frankfort?

I suppose Lundergan was selected by a lost and frightened Democratic leadership looking to "go conservative" after the party's most recent electoral spanking.

Surely Democrats have noticed by now that despite whatever redeeming qualities Lundergan may possess, his selection effectively seized the moral low ground on issues related to the public trust.

His June 26 quote in the Herald-Leader showed considerable pluck, as he actually appeared to be offering the Republicans advice on how to handle their scandal:

"They need to just admit what they've done, take responsibility for it, fix it so it doesn't happen again and move on with the business of state government."

Scraaaaatch!

Who is he to offer advice on taking responsibility?

Or is this really a conciliatory comment, a wink to the Republicans assuring them that the Democratic leadership won't be overly critical and that business in Frankfort can continue as usual?

In 1989, Lundergan was convicted of violating an ethics law barring legislators from doing no-bid work for the state. However, his conviction was overturned on grounds it should have been prosecuted as a misdemeanor, not a felony. The statute of limitations has since expired.

Does his past make it impossible for him to act effectively as a Democratic spokesman dedicated to upholding the law?

The hiring scandal shines light on life in Frankfort where apparently loyalty to certain people is more important to politicians than loyalty to the rule of law.

It's true of too many Democrats. It's true of too many Republicans. Perhaps this is not shocking in a state that expects so little from its government.

Republicans complain that they aren't doing anything the Democrats haven't also done -- which may be true -- but still sounds like an admission of guilt to me.

Instead of fixing the problem, as promised, the Fletcher administration seems to prefer to lower

performance standards, discard veterans and remove any obstacles to party members' continued patronage.

But hiring unqualified political cronies in merit positions is illegal for good reason. Doing so moves the bureaucracy away from excellence, breeding even more frustration in citizens who need an effective government to help solve problems.

I have thought Fletcher to be an honorable man who is stumbling in a difficult job. When asked for comment by the Herald-Leader on May 21, Fletcher's first instinct was his best one:

"All I'm saying is that we've certainly made mistakes, and we will continue to because we're human ... The mistake that was made is not having a formal process for these recommendations ... After 30 years of Republicans not being in here, we have been flooded with recommendations of folks feeling like in the past they had absolutely no opportunity, and now they did have an opportunity."

Ahhhh, the refreshing ring of truth.

Since that time, his comments have been a disappointing mix of stonewalling, misdirection and obfuscation all too reminiscent of presidents Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton at their worst.

It seems somebody got to Fletcher. I'm tempted to blame his advisers, but in the end, it is his responsibility, and Fletcher looks increasingly like a governor who has gotten himself handled.

As for Attorney General Greg Stumbo and his investigation, good for him. The hiring scandal broke when Fletcher was in Asia, and Stumbo was correct to proceed immediately.

If the Lundergan case has taught us anything, it is that prosecuting misdemeanors, with a one-year statute of limitations, requires haste.

We need an attorney general who will uphold the law by prosecuting illegal activity. We could all feel better about it if we knew Stumbo's motives were pure. Unfortunately, that's not crystal clear.

After all, it was Stumbo who, while state House Majority Floor Leader, told the Herald-Leader in 1991 that he was happy for Lundergan that his conviction was overturned and thought he never should have been prosecuted.

Scraaaaaaaaaaatch!

When personal loyalties take precedence over the law, individuals may win, but the state loses.

Fletcher created his own mess, but Lundergan's remarks recall his own past

Caption: Jerry Lundergan is chairman of the Kentucky Democratic Party.

**Richard Day** of Lexington is a retired elementary school principal.

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