Higher Education Twists In The Wind

THE CHILLING MOMENT CAME AT THE END of a hopeful peace conference between the governor and conservative legislators. Swiveling in chairs in the comfortable Senate briefing room for two hours, Edwin Edwards and the lawmakers agreed on some points, agreed to disagree on others and appeared to be making some real progress. So much so that as the meeting broke up, Robert Adley tried to push his luck.

As Edwards admiringly fingered Adley’s fine silk blazer, the northwest Louisiana Democrat asked, “Can’t we work something out on restructuring higher education?”

“Sure,” said the governor, “we can close down LSU-S and Southern-S and Bossier Community College.”

“Come on, governor, that’s not what I mean,” Adley smiled.

Edwin Edwards did not smile, coolly regarding Adley as though to say: But it is what I meant.

Three weeks later, as a lean-and-mean budget bill moved out of the House, that moment came back into focus. The conservatives still hold the upper hand in the struggle over taxes vs. cuts. But the price of their freedom from populist politics is the very health of the institutions that promise a brighter future.

Without raising taxes, House members have rearranged the governor’s doomsday budget to reinstate supplemental pay for fireman and police and critical funding for mental health clinics. But left to twist in the deficit wind are the state’s colleges, which stand to take a hellish 20 percent hit over last year’s reduced funding.

As the Senate takes up the budget bill, there is still some hope for compromise on some amount in taxes—to up to $200 million—to restore the most sensitive cuts. But with neither side in this standoff ready to tread that dangerous middle ground, it is clear that the final hostage will be higher education. It is the one victim that each side figures, if it must, it can sacrifice.

That’s the real problem of higher education. Slashing cuts will not be felt outside of college campuses until it’s too late, two or three years down the line when other Southern states are passing up Louisiana in attracting the kinds of jobs that do not involve dice or cards.

A tax-and-cut compromise can bypass the governor if a majority in both houses choose to enter the brave new world together. The key to that historic breakthrough rests with a handful of state senators, who, until now, have sided with the governor instead of with the House in setting spending priorities. When there is money to spend, a majority of senators always stick with the governor in order to be first at the trough. Now, when the only thing to eat is the young, some piggies may look twice at the hand that’s doing the feeding.

WHILE HIGHER EDUCATION STANDS TO SUFFER A $134 million cut, basic and secondary education will receive an extra $32 million in dedicated funds. The Legislature cannot on its own cut the annual funding without the consent of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. BESE, to demonstrate its sensitivity to the plight of other budget victims, did trim back its increase by $600,000.

It is unconscionable that the elected members of BESE can pretend they cannot do with less than a $32 million spending jump in order to run their
Empire of Mediocrity known as public education. The colleges are funded by lawmakers who must raise the taxes for the money they spend. BESE just has to charge it and send the bill to the Legislature.

Higher education is not without fault, but it’s also without $134 million. The only way to bust the BESE trust is with two-thirds of the Legislature approving a request of the governor—which he refuses to make, especially since that would take some pressure off lawmakers to raise taxes.

As Uncle Earl once said of a rival, “A good whippin’ would do that boy a world of good.” So, too, for the education bureaucrats and their elected protectors at BESE. The teacher groups and administrators will howl—let ‘em—but the Education Department is one giant marshmallow: A $30 million whack would shape it up a lot and force the turf protectors to focus on what’s working there and what isn’t.