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Legislature puts politics above its duty

By Times Wire

It came as no surprise that the Republicans who rule the Florida Legislature quickly adjourned a special session Tuesday without considering a constitutional amendment to ban drilling in state waters. Their arrogance, their contempt for Gov. Charlie Crist and their willingness to place petty politics above pragmatic policy have been evident for months. It will be up to voters to hold them accountable for their lack of respect for public office, the will of the people and the state's fragile shoreline.

House Speaker Larry Cretul, in a pique of partisan spite, led the near-unanimous Republican caucus to adjourn the special session less than a hour after it began. The chamber never took up Crist's call to place a constitutional amendment on the November ballot asking voters to ban drilling in state waters 3 to 10 miles from shore. Within the hour, the Senate voted 18-16 to follow suit, since any action it took would ultimately have been moot. The result is that once again the out-of-touch Legislature has turned its back on the majority of voters.

It's not the first time since his accidental ascension to the speakership that Cretul has abused his power and gagged anyone who differed with his wrongheaded views. Earlier this year, he refused to allow any amendments to Senate Bill 6, the controversial teacher accountability bill that Crist later vetoed. On Tuesday, Cretul and incoming House Speaker Dean Cannon of Winter Park claimed they were trying to protect the Constitution from Crist, who left the Republican Party to run for the U.S. Senate as an independent. Actually, the amendment would have protected Florida from Cannon.

After gas prices rose in 2009, Cannon passed a bill overturning the state law that bans drilling in state waters. He was stopped by the Senate, which was far more mindful of the potential damage to the state's tourist-based economy from offshore drilling.

After the Deepwater Horizon spill that is soiling Panhandle beaches, Cannon and incoming Senate President Mike Haridopolos, R-Melbourne, pledged they wouldn't push to lift the drilling ban when they begin their two-year turns as leaders in November. But even fellow Republican legislators said Tuesday they don't trust that the ban in state law won't be undermined. Neither should voters, particularly after these two helped orchestrate Tuesday's debacle. Big Oil has a powerful grip in Tallahassee, and it will resurface after the BP well is capped.

Amid all the political posturing, there is one potential positive. Both House and Senate leaders committed to returning to Tallahassee in September to consider legislation to help those now suffering the most from the BP spill. Hopefully they can do better at that job, though it won't compensate for the utter disrespect they already have shown voters.

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