

GEORGIANS HAVE LOST THEIR BEST FRIEND IN STATE GOVERNMENT

Teddy Lee just got fired as executive secretary of the State Ethics Commission. It is your loss — and a big one. He was sacked by a bunch of politicians who couldn't bend him, fold him or intimidate him from representing your interests above theirs. It is not an overstatement to say that many in political power in the state, whether Democrats or Republicans, view the State Ethics Commission with equal parts odium and disdain. Some of that attitude is our own fault. We could demand better ethical behavior from our public officials if we really cared, but we have low expectations of our politicians. Unfortunately, they willingly meet those expectations.

Teddy Lee believed that public officials should be above reproach, not above the law. For 15 years he managed a minuscule staff with a puny budget, administered some of the weakest ethics laws in the nation and was highly effective in spite of these obstacles. That turned out to be his problem. Politicians don't want their ethics commissions to be highly effective. Politicians want ethics commissions to stay the hell out of their business.

Matt Towery, chairman of InsiderAdvantage, a national political polling firm and a former Georgia Republican state senator, told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, "I think it was an unwise move and very poor timing to remove a man who has labored in a department that was understaffed, underfunded, and with rules that were ill-defined, just as ethics in Georgia started to have sharper teeth." I couldn't have said it better myself.

Gov. Zell Miller appointed me to the State Ethics Commission in 1997 to fill a vacant seat and later reappointed me to a full term. It was a great experience, even with the limited power we had. We nailed a couple of high-level Democratic legislators and a one-time Republican gubernatorial candidate (not Sonny Perdue) for their cavalier approach to financial reporting. We were also on the case of former Democratic kingmaker state Senator Charles Walker of Augusta, long before the Feds got him.

Sonny Perdue came into office trying to exert influence over the commission — supposedly an independent body — by forcing the resignations of previous appointees, blocking new appointments and clearly putting Teddy Lee in his gun sights. It took Perdue three years and the appointment of compliant yes-men to the commission to accomplish his goal. Strange behavior from a man who describes himself as the "ethics governor."

Ethics — like motherhood and apple pie — is something all politicians pay homage to, but that's about all they do. Gov. Perdue is touting new ethics laws that have just gone into effect, but the law has more holes in it than Bonnie and Clyde. For one thing, the commission overseeing the law is now firmly under the governor's control in spite of what his minions say, and the measure allows lawmakers to police each other for ethical violations. Oh, please.

While Democrats are busy pointing to Lee's dismissal as an example of the GOP's lack of commitment to ethical government, they are crying crocodile tears. Democrats don't care any more about strong ethics than do Republicans. They had ample opportunity over the years to put some strength in the ethics laws in Georgia, but they didn't. Speaker Tom Murphy refused to give us adequate funding, and during Roy Barnes' term as governor we were hassled by his staff who wanted to treat us like a branch of the administration. We told them not only "no," but "hell, no." We were an independent body. They wisely decided to leave us alone.

Much of the state's media has decried Lee's removal, but the issue will soon blow over because the politicians know we really don't care. And we don't. But just remember that you have lost your best friend in state government and a rigorous watchdog against political corruption.

There is one glimmer of good news in this whole sordid mess. Teddy Lee leaves the job with his head held high and without one scintilla of taint on him. What's more, he won't have to put up with double-dealing, self-serving politicians and an apathetic public anymore. Frankly, neither group deserves his time or his talent.