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## WHAT STATE POLITICIANS NEED IS A GOOD OLD-FASHIONED TEA PARTY

What this state needs is a good old-fashioned Tea Party. Not one directed at the liberal weenies in Washington who tried to ram health care reform down our throats. This protest needs to focus on the State of Georgia.

Our governor and members of the General Assembly continue to remind us that state revenues are dropping precipitously and budgets must be cut.

Among those making the hard choices are legislators who did not file their taxes last year. We aren't talking about filing late or filing incorrectly. We are talking about people who did not file. Period. And they will be making decisions that will affect your pocketbook and mine? That is appalling.

I watched Paul Crawley, the no-nonsense political reporter at WXIA in Atlanta interview new House Speaker Dennis Ralston the other night. Crawley reminded Ralston we have another crop of legislators who haven't filed their taxes. I found Ralston's response astonishing.

"These legislators, many are working people," he said. "They're subject to having the same problems as other working people. So I think you have to look at the individual case — and I don't think you can make a blanket determination."

Crawley, refusing to let the speaker off the hook, finally got Ralston to concede that there is no excuse for not even filing the paperwork. That's a start.

I'm not going to tell the speaker how to run his job. If I did, he would want to tell me how to write this column. But, I would suggest he show a little righteous indignation at having people who write our laws blithely choose not to follow them.

Speaking of righteous indignation, there is suddenly a heap of it in the Legislature directed at these scofflaws. Rep. Calvin Hill (R-Canton) has introduced a bill calling for a constitutional amendment to bar anyone from holding office who fails "in a timely manner" to file their taxes or to pay them. Under this proposal, the State Ethics Commission would have the power to remove office holders at any level from city, county or state offices. Outsiders removing politicians from office? As a former member of the State Ethics Commission, I will believe that one when I see it.

Revenue Commissioner Bart Graham, who cannot reveal the names of the legislators by law, has given the miscreants 30 days to explain themselves before he hands over the list to the legislative ethics committees for possible disciplinary action. That is where the rubber will meet the road. Will the legislators actually discipline their colleagues? Or will this turn out like the charges against Ralston's predecessor Glenn Richardson, who was accused of having an affair with a gas company lobbyist while shepherding a \$300 million pipeline bill through the Legislature? That complaint was dismissed by the Joint Legislative Ethics Committee without ever holding a hearing. It took a scorned ex-wife to get the facts out. What leads us to believe it will be any better this time?

Now Rep. Wendell Willard (R-Sandy Springs) is proposing legislation to strengthen the ethics laws in the wake of the Richardson debacle. Willard's proposal would prohibit legislators from accepting any gift worth more than \$100, but puts no limits on how many times a sub-\$100 gift can be accepted. That's absurd. Why do they need to accept any gifts at all?

Our legislators don't get it. If somebody is going to cut education and furlough school teachers — again — we want it to be people we can trust to act with integrity. I don't trust tax cheats and I don't trust people who play games with ethical conduct. Are our politicians just now discovering this?

For too long we have allowed too many legislators — Republican and Democrat — to operate as though they are not accountable to us for their actions. And we have been too apathetic to do anything about it. We just keep sending them back to Atlanta. (One problem is we always think "our" legislator is doing a grand job; it's all those other politicians who are the issue.)

Maybe it is time for change under the Gold Dome. Maybe it is time for a good old-fashioned Tea Party protest in Georgia. It is long overdue.