

Kevin Rennie: The Connecticut Port Authority needs to be cleaned up



By KEVIN RENNIE
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Scott Bates, former chairman and board member of the Connecticut Port Authority, resigned in early August. His exit is the latest in a shakeup of the agency related to a \$3,000 payment for photos by the daughter of a former board chairwoman. (Patrick Raycraft)

The Connecticut Port Authority continues to provide vivid reminders of the unsavory temptations of power. Most public officials resist, but when a spotlight shines on those who do not, it shreds public confidence in our government.

The cull of miscreants grows. The Day newspaper of New London has been performing a public service by uncovering the misuse of authority and, of course, money at the quasi-public agency. Old Lyme First Selectwoman Bonnie Reemsnyder resigned as chairwoman of the CPA when The Day's David Collins revealed that the agency spent \$3,000 on six photographs taken by Reemsnyder's daughter.

The purchase was made in an endless redecorating of the CPA's Old Saybrook headquarters. Reemsnyder resigned last month. She had been preceded as chairman by Scott Bates, whose taste for showering public money on unqualified friends caused him to have to resign from the authority this month as scandal grew.

Bates, according to Collins's reporting, enjoyed presiding over a festival of cronies at the sleepy agency. He rewarded friends with contracts and approved the purchase of the pricey Reemsnyder photographs. Bates has also resigned from the CPA but still holds a critical public position of trust.

Bates, an ambitious Stonington Democrat who entertained a bid for governor in 2018, serves as Deputy Secretary of State. His taste for grandiosity was on full display at his swearing-in ceremony in early 2017.

In addition to state Democratic elected officials, Bates included diplomats from Kosovo in the event. Bates, according to his resume, has been involved in nation-building missions to war-torn countries.

The swearing-in of a deputy to a Connecticut official is usually a quiet, routine affair. Bates likes a show when he's at the center of it, though the scandal cascading around him this summer has stilled his loquacious nature. There is no romance like the one between an ambitious office-seeker and his resume. Bates has enjoyed showcasing his. The London School of Economics graduate notes in his biography that as an official in Virginia, he "is credited for the state's ethics reforms." In light of recent revelations, it causes one to wonder what those might have been.

The secretary of state's office is critical to Connecticut's democracy. We know that because Denise Merrill, the three-term incumbent, tells us so. On her state website, Merrill assures us she has "improved Connecticut's democratic accountability and integrity." Democracy is about more than Election Day snafus. If Merrill believes what she claims, Bates will be dismissed from his position. There's no reason to conclude that Bates's shabby misuse of authority will be confined to his tenure at the CPA.

Democratic leaders have stilled their voices on Bates continuing at the center of the state's election administration office. They can't all be on vacation. Merrill strives to create an air of rectitude but has spent almost 30 years climbing the greasy pole of state politics. This is her test. Merrill will diminish her office's authority if she makes it a safe haven for high profile hackery.

And then there is the fate of the port authority. State Treasurer Shawn Wooden, like Merrill, a Democrat, writing in *The Day* on Tuesday about the port authority's recent record, refers to the crippling effects of "mismanagement, misdirection and mistrust." If you claw through some of the jargon and cliches, Wooden makes essential points. At a time when Gov. Ned Lamont is eager to gamble on wedging the state into a regional role in wind power, we need trustworthy, competent people at the center of power.

The authority oversees the state's three deepwater ports, located in Bridgeport, New Haven and New London. In addition to the resignations of the two prominent board members, the executive director has been on paid leave for ugly comments he made about an agency critic. The joint is a mess. It's no place to be negotiating and overseeing a \$93 million contract for improvements to the New London port to make it a staging area for deepwater wind power sites miles offshore.

Shoveling out the muck at the CPA will require more than changing the duration of board member terms, a sad suggestion of one Lamont aide at a legislative hearing on Tuesday. Our governor with an MBA from Yale will need to be bold and creative if he's to revive the ports in what he earlier this year called "a small landlocked state."

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