

Daily Journal

Those ‘dang idiots’ keep our boat afloat

By: Charlie Mitchell – January 8th, 2013

OXFORD – As Mississippi lawmakers huddle in Jackson to start the 2013 session, there will be the usual grumbling about those dang idiots in Washington.

Gripping this year will be especially intense for two reasons. One is that this state’s executive and legislative branches are more red than ever. The Tea Party brand of conservatism that swept the nation in 2010 has faded elsewhere, but remains alive and well in the Capitol and in the Governor’s Mansion of Mississippi. Second is that bad-old Obamacare is coming down the pike.

There’s nothing wrong with balancing spending with their income. Mississippi lawmakers are required to do that every year – and do. Unlike their counterparts at the federal level – who saved us from plummeting off the fiscal cliff on New Year’s Day (by agreeing to charge merely half-trillion dollars a year more to our credit cards than we can pay) – the Legislature does manage to keep Mississippi operating in the black ... sort of.

This is where irony comes into the picture. No state mutters and cusses more about Washington than Mississippi. And yet no state’s public and private finances are as dependent – emphasize dependent – on the what we keep complaining about.

The Cato Institute says the return on investment for federal taxes paid by New Yorkers (including corporations) is 25.5 percent. New Yorkers pay the most to get the least.

Cato calculates the return on investment for Mississippi taxpayers at 1,104.3 percent. Mississippians pay the least to get the most. It means for every \$25 New Yorkers send to Washington, they get an envelope back with \$6.37. For every \$25 Mississippians send, we get an envelope back with \$300. It’s not a point of pride that we are the donee state of donee states.

Of course, our state’s officials don’t frame the discussion this way. Federal largess and congressionals mandates are most often convenient scapegoats. But when Congress allocated billions in Hurricane Katrina rebuilding cash – including the nation’s first-ever individual homeowner grants – that was not nonsense.

When Congress awards \$1.43 in highway construction money for every \$1 in fuel and other taxes collected in Mississippi, that’s not nonsense.

Two years ago, Congress paid a half-billion dollars toward the public, private and

commercial college expenses of 118,140 Mississippi students in Pell awards, which are grants, not loans.

Last fiscal year, Congress provided 87 percent of the \$3.95 billion in Medicaid expenses of poor, elderly and disabled Mississippians, leaving this state to use its own tax collections to pay the rest.

And “the rest,” of course, is the sticking point – or one of the sticking points – on Obamacare. Gov. Phil Bryant and others point out that the new federal legislation’s expansion of Medicaid eligibility dumps an undue burden on Mississippians, one that cannot be sustained. Even with the feds paying 100 percent of the increase for three years, Bryant says annual 8 percent to 10 percent increases in the Medicaid costs plus tens of thousands of new clients will combine to leave the state belly-up – unable to fund the other basic obligations, which he defines as public safety, education, transportation.

Well, whether Bryant’s projection of the burden of Obamacare is 100 percent correct or 100 percent incorrect, the state is already not funding its other basic obligations.

We are a financial burden on our American brethren.

If Congress just decided to excommunicate Mississippi and issue new flags with 49 stars, the other 297 million Americans would have us – a cash junkie – off their backs.

In a perfect world, lawmakers in session in Jackson would ponder these realities, specifically that though this state has been fiscally responsible, it will suffer the most from any plunge over a fiscal cliff simply because it is so dependent on federal aid of all types at all levels.

Every minute of every day of the 2013 legislative session should be spent studying the ways other locales have ginned up their local economies and applying those models here.

Every minute of every day should be spent making Mississippi less dependent. It’s ludicrous to sit atop the highest perch on the donee ladder and complain about federal irresponsibility.