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CITIZEN JOURNALISM: FYI

Civics 101 from retired Justice Souter

David H. Souter, who was replaced at the Supreme Court on Saturday after Sonia Sotomayor was sworn in, said in a rare public address that too many Americans don't understand how government works and that unless the public is better educated about civics, the power of judges to be independent of political pressures could be seriously eroded.

Justice Souter, who retired earlier this year to his native New Hampshire, is working with the New Hampshire Supreme Court Society to help launch a rebirth of civic education. A report released by the society in December concluded that the state has no core civics curriculum.

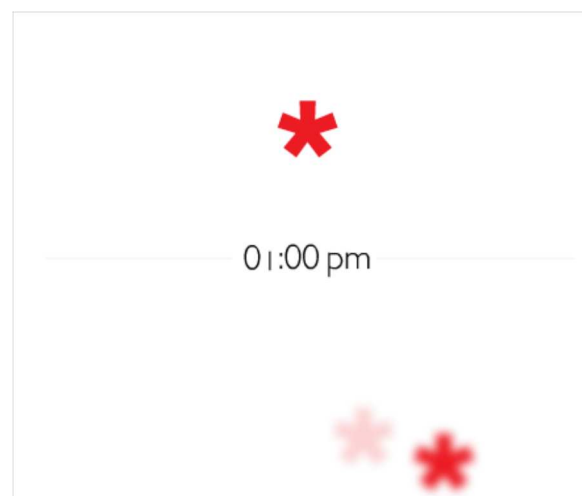
"There is a danger to judicial independence when people have no understanding of how the judiciary fits into the constitutional scheme," Mr. Souter said in his Aug. 1 keynote address in Chicago at the annual meeting of the American Bar Association.

He also cited a poll that said two-thirds of Americans cannot name the three branches of government and urged the audience to become engaged in the rebirth of civics lessons.

The president of the society, Susan Leahy, said the interest of the 69-year-old Mr. Souter grew partly from working with another retired justice, Sandra Day O'Connor.

"I think he became very intrigued when he learned about the appalling lack of knowledge people have about their government," she told Associated Press.

Are school bells ringing for national standards?



The Obama administration has said one of its priorities is the adoption of national standards. But the debate continues about whether school systems across the nation should adopt one-size-fits-all national education standards.

Several organizations, including major unions, have already endorsed the idea. But detractors raise some important questions that have yet to be answered: Who should set the standards and what should they include?

Neal McCluskey, an associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom and author of "Feds in the Classroom," offered insight.

"There's no compelling evidence that national standards are the key to excellence. What advocates typically point to is that almost every nation that beats us on international comparisons has national standards. But, then, almost every nation that does worse than we do has such standards. And Canada has no national standards but does very well on international exams.

"How about the theoretical case?

"There certainly isn't a good one based on how standards would be set. Whether done by states alone, states together, or Washington, the decisions would ultimately fall to politicians, people whose primary concern is their own political success, and that means placating the folks with the greatest motivation and ability to influence education politics: the teachers, administrators, and others whose livelihoods come through the schools. And those people, rationally, would prefer to have the lowest possible standards imposed on them.

"That said, there are several advantages to having individual states in charge, though they are slight because the main pressure at all levels is to keep standards low.

"When each state is responsible for its own standards there is at least some pressure to keep benchmarks high; caring parents, or companies in search of a better educated workforce, might gravitate toward high-standard states. And when states stand alone their leaders can't adopt poor standards and use the fact that they are common as an excuse."

• *Read the entire article at http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=10292.*

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