Politics gone phishing

ALAN CHOATE — Daily Herald Feb. 18, 2006

It was an introduction designed to grab attention for an unsexy subject.

"Please listen up," proclaimed state Sen. Patrice Arent, D-Salt Lake City, on the Senate floor last week. "We're going to make it a second-degree felony to 'phish' in Utah."

Get it? Phish?

Like, when spam e-mail seeks your personal information?

Maybe you had to be there.

Or maybe it's better you weren't. This particular exchange — on legislation toughening penalties for "phishing" — is but one example of the bad jokes that fly around Capitol Hill, eliciting groans, head-shaking and rolled eyes.

The press corps has even considered installing a gong to punish the worst of the wisecracks.

To be fair, Arent's adventure in punning — there's more, and it got worse — was not the best display of legislative humor, which takes many forms: good-natured partisanship, rhetorical hyperbole, hazing, (sometimes) clever wordplay.

Being funny is not always the point.

"I think the humor in the Senate acts as a bit of a safety valve," said Sen. Scott McCoy, D-Salt Lake City. A newer member of the Legislature, he was on the receiving end of some hazing last week when the Senate wouldn't let him change his vote after he mistakenly voted yes on a bill.

"We can all get worked up on certain issues that we feel really passionate about and divided on, and on the next bill we're cracking jokes and making puns," he said. "I think that's actually good. It helps keep the collegiality together."

Let the jokes begin.

Good ol' partisanship

Lawmakers are often at their best when taking pokes at their colleagues across the aisle. When debating a bill that would make a state board nonpartisan, for example, Sen. Greg Bell, R-Fruit Heights, noted that the GOP can't count on being as in control of state government as they are now.

"Right now it may seem like, to both sides, that that would take a tectonic plate shift. I hope that's true," he said, setting off the following exchange:

Sen. Mike Dmitrich, D-Price: "Sen. Bell, I've grown old waiting for that wind to shift."

Sen. Darin Peterson, R-Nephi: "I gotta say, I bet he has waited a long time for the wind to shift, because he's an old codger."

That drew laughter and some catcalls.

Sen. John Valentine, R-Orem: "Careful about impugning one's integrity on the floor."

Peterson: "I would just say he would refer to me as a redneck."

Valentine: "We can stipulate to the oldness. The codger part is the harder part."

Valentine presides over the Senate and is charged with keeping business moving right along. Jokes — even if they aren't funny — are a fundamental part of that process, he said.

"I try to make certain that we don't take ourselves too seriously," said Valentine. "I allow a little humor to come into the debate. I even do it from the stand myself.

"The main purpose ... is to keep the body in a mood that can debate issues on their merits. We can do just a little bit of humor to try and keep things going."

Something they all agree on

Though lawmakers are often divided along party or ideological lines, in one area they are unanimous in their distaste, even enmity: The Media.

They've had plenty of opportunities to tee off on the Fourth Estate this year, too, because of bills seeking to reform how gifts from lobbyists are reported. Many legislators have said there is no problem with lobbyist reporting — except for the innuendo generated by reporters.

Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, compared reporters to a "swarm of killer bees" on Thursday during a discussion of bills that would lower the reporting limit to either $5 or $10.

On Friday, he received a can of Raid from a Salt Lake City reporter, along with this letter:

"Please accept this small gift for your protection the next time a swarm of reporters, which could include me, buzzes your way. Just so you know, this gift cost less than $5, so I don't believe I need to include it on any official disclosure forms."

The gift was so well received, Stephenson said he was inspired: "Next session," he told his colleagues, "based on this, I intend to sponsor legislation designating reporters as the state insect."

Which, hopefully, protects them from indiscriminate spraying.

All talk

Loquacity is another way to introduce levity to the proceedings, and in the Senate an acknowledged master of the form is Sen. Ed Mayne, D-West Valley City.

That's why Valentine recognized Mayne's request to speak Friday on some energy legislation by saying, "We're going to see a demonstration of wind energy now."

Mayne's best showing so far was a 10-minute-plus soliloquy in opposition to legislation by Sen. Sheldon Killpack, R-Syracuse, that would allow the state to enter partnerships with private entities to build toll roads.

Potential partners, he said, include "China — they're covering most of our debt that we're not paying on a national level. Maybe they can come and own a few toll roads in Utah. Maybe Enron. Now there's one I would really, really trust as far as investing and getting back their money from us ... the Wal-Mart toll roads. Now that's a good one, too. Maybe Wal-Mart can build it."

In addition to international finance, corporate fraud and the world's largest retailer, Mayne also linked the bill to the minimum wage debate, tax breaks for truckers, the gasoline tax, election-year politics, the projected budget surplus and the price of tea in — wait. He already said China.

Killpack, meanwhile, made exaggerated "grasping at straws" motions. Mayne kept talking.

Wounded by words

Where lawmakers can get in the most trouble, however, is when they reach too far for a clever turn of phrase.

In announcing a daily media briefing, for instance, an e-mail from Valentine's office said that "Every day is Valentine's Day." A staffer actually came up with the line, so the Senate President can avoid a flogging for that one.

But when it comes to wordplay to make you wince, Arent's anti-phishing fusillade reigns supreme.

She summed up her legislation thusly:

"We want to 'catch' the bad guys and make sure they're not 'released.' We do not want them to 'net' a lot of money. This is a 'reel' problem. We want to make sure others are not 'lured' into this. We hope this bill is not 'gutted' by the Senate. We would like to 'fillet' the opposition and are now 'trolling' for votes."

Take a deep breath, gentle reader. There's more.

The other senators joined in.

Sen. Curt Bramble, R-Provo: "Are we supposed to swallow this hook, line and sinker?"

McCoy: "We shouldn't just let this be another fish story and we shouldn't let this be the one that got away."

Sen. Karen Hale, D-Salt Lake City: "I'd like to 'cast' my vote as aye."

In spite of this abuse, senators passed the bill. Unanimously.

A few days later the list of fish puns came up at the end of the day as Mayne and Arent were wrapping up their work.

"That," said Mayne, "was really —"

"— bad. I know," said Arent.

"Bleah," responded Mayne, as he mimed sticking his finger down his throat.

Indeed.

The gong's on order.