

WINDOM GALLIHER

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The most troubling article of all: Impeachment

Gov. Bentley fights for his job as legislators grapple with how to deal with resolution

A week off gave legislators time for quick beach trips, spending time with family, catching up on their regular jobs or perhaps a few moments of rest. What it didn't provide them was any shelter from the aftershocks of the continual media bombardment of Gov. Robert Bentley by those clamoring for his ouster.

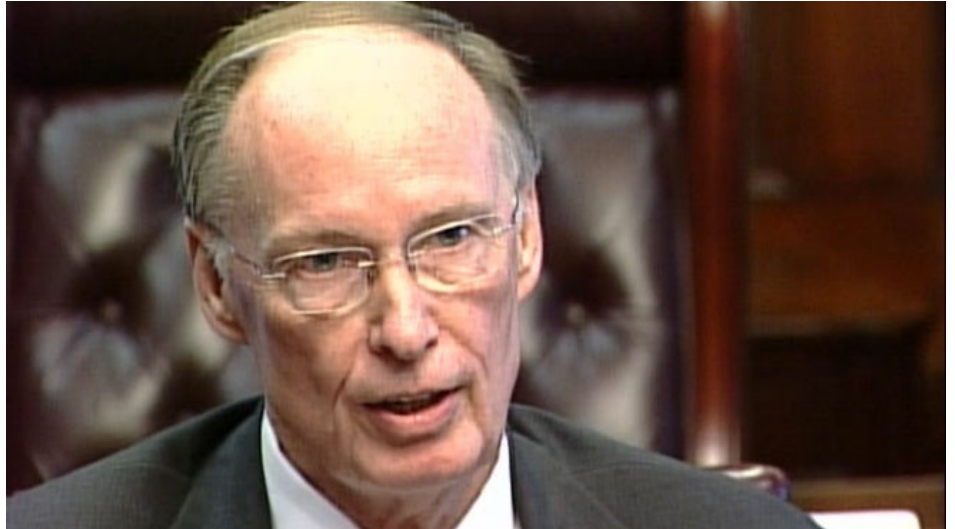
Months of whispers gave way to audio clips of Gov. Bentley engaging in inappropriate conversations with his former aide Rebekah Mason, which gave way to full tapes, which has led to calls for his resignation.

Rep. Ed Henry (R-Hartselle) turned up the heat even more Tuesday as he filed HR226, which were articles of impeachment. Nine Republicans and one Democrat signed on as co-sponsors. Like all resolutions, it was sent to the House Rules Committee, where chair Rep. Mac McCutcheon (R-Madison) says an investigative subcommittee will be empaneled to determine procedure. What is known is this: the state Constitution is quite vague regarding impeachment.

The resolution tracks allegations made by former Secretary of Law Enforcement Spencer Collier, whose longtime friendship with Gov. Bentley crumbled in recent months.

Needless to say, the episode has consumed copious amounts of political oxygen this week and will hover over the remaining 10 days of the legislative session.

It has also altered political strategy. Even as the story unfolded, Gov. Bentley rattled his saber threatening a veto of the General Fund budget that fell far



AT LEFT, REP. ED HENRY (R-HARTSELLE) ANNOUNCES A RESOLUTION THAT CONTAINS ARTICLES OF IMPEACHMENT AGAINST GOV. ROBERT BENTLEY (ABOVE). GOV. BENTLEY CALLS THE MOVE 'GRANDSTANDING,' BUT THE HOUSE RULES COMMITTEE WILL SET UP A PANEL TO INVESTIGATE THE PROCESS.

short of his desires and also pledged to call the Legislature into a summer special session on Medicaid funding. The final version of the budget that the Legislature sent to the Governor increased Medicaid funding by \$15 million, but much less than the \$100 million Commissioner Stephanie Azar said her agency needed.

Not surprisingly, Gov. Bentley followed through with his threat to veto the budget, and not surprisingly, both the Senate and House quickly overrode the veto. The Senate did it in a 24-11 vote, while the House followed suit 71-24.

For his part, Gov. Bentley started to back off his special session plans – perhaps driven by impeachment talk. He and Azar had a news conference Wednesday outlining the cuts that would be made to Medicaid to deal with the budget that is now law. As expected, outpatient dialysis, eyeglasses and prosthetics/orthotics benefits were sized up for the chopping block. Gov. Bentley mentioned reduced reimbursement rates for physicians, dentists and other medical providers, and eliminating prescription drugs for adult beneficiaries.

Many legislators have said all along – and Senate Pro Tem Del Marsh (R-Anniston) reiterated this week – that

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Pain

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until there is widespread clamor for new revenue that the cuts were the proper route. The logic has been all along that there would have to be *real pain* – translated, people losing benefits – to help push a groundswell for action. Otherwise, legislators would be content to keep the budget as is.

Gov. Bentley and Azar said the budget as is would prevent the Regional Care Organizations (RCOs) from launching Oct. 1. The RCOs were touted as the answer to Alabama's Medicaid woes, but now appear on the verge of shriveling up on the vine.

Even as the Governor lost the budget battle, he did gain a significant win Tues-

day in the Senate as the upper chamber passed his \$800 million bond issue to build new state prisons. The prison construction legislation has a tough fight in the House, but is expected to pass.

In the House, the largest piece of legislation to gain passage was HB62 by House

Pro Tem Rep. Victor Gaston (R-Mobile), which would extend the state's tax credit program for rehabilitating historic structures. Rep. Gaston added language to the bill to provide 10 percent of the credits available to rural areas, and the bill sailed through. The other item of note was that the Legislature completed its work on alcohol reform. Bills to give more room to operate for the state's fledgling distillery and winery industries gained final passage. The craft brewery legislation passed earlier in the session.

With 10 days left in the regular session, the Education Trust Fund budget will take center stage in the Senate, while the House will grapple with the prison reform bill and make a final effort to revamp the state's gasoline tax. There will be plenty of activity, though, in the hallways as various interests scramble to get their bills passed as the sands of the session continue to fall through the hourglass.

The Legislature has signaled it will meet on Tuesday and Wednesday this coming week before taking a long weekend, followed by at least two three-day weeks. The hourglass, though, may have even less sand as the Senate is looking at concluding the session after eight more legislative days instead of 10. For those looking to kill bills, it is good news. As for those with bills to pass, it would make a tight schedule even tighter.

Note: The Windom Galliher Montgomery Update publishes weekly during the legislative session, monthly in the off-season, and as events warrant otherwise. With the Legislature on spring break this coming week, the Windom Galliher Montgomery Update will take a one-week hiatus.