

Bangor Daily News

Founded in 1889

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JOURNALISM STEPS UP TO SHOW ITS WORTH

For those who doubt the value of journalism, consider the following. In June, the Bangor Daily News reported that the Department of Health and Human Services was misspending federal money meant to help poor Maine children and families. The department's commissioner, Mary Mayhew, told other reporters that the BDN had its facts wrong.

However, less than two months later, the department quietly updated reports it must file with the federal government, showing that it had reversed the transfer of funds in question, returning nearly \$8 million in federal funds to their original account, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, which pays for cash assistance, job training and placement, and child care for low-income Maine families.

The Department of Health and Human Services refused to admit to its actions — although the federal documentation is clear — and it refused to explain how it had retroactively accounted for \$7.8 million that it had initially spent on services for elderly and disabled Mainers.

This is only one example of how government has become less transparent under the administration of Gov. Paul LePage. At the same time, political leaders, such as LePage and Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump, have managed to escape accountability for their outrageous actions and lies, whether they are about immigrants or tax and spending policies that don't add up. As a result, the job of journalism has become more difficult — and more controversial — as reporters are called upon regularly not just to tell the stories but to make judgments about what's true and what's a lie.

As a consequence, journalist bashing is popular these days. LePage, upset about media coverage of his deplorable behavior, says he's no longer talking to the press. Many state departments, including the Department of Health and Human Services, refuse to answer questions from journalists — and lawmakers.

These actions don't just add up to a punishment of reporters that

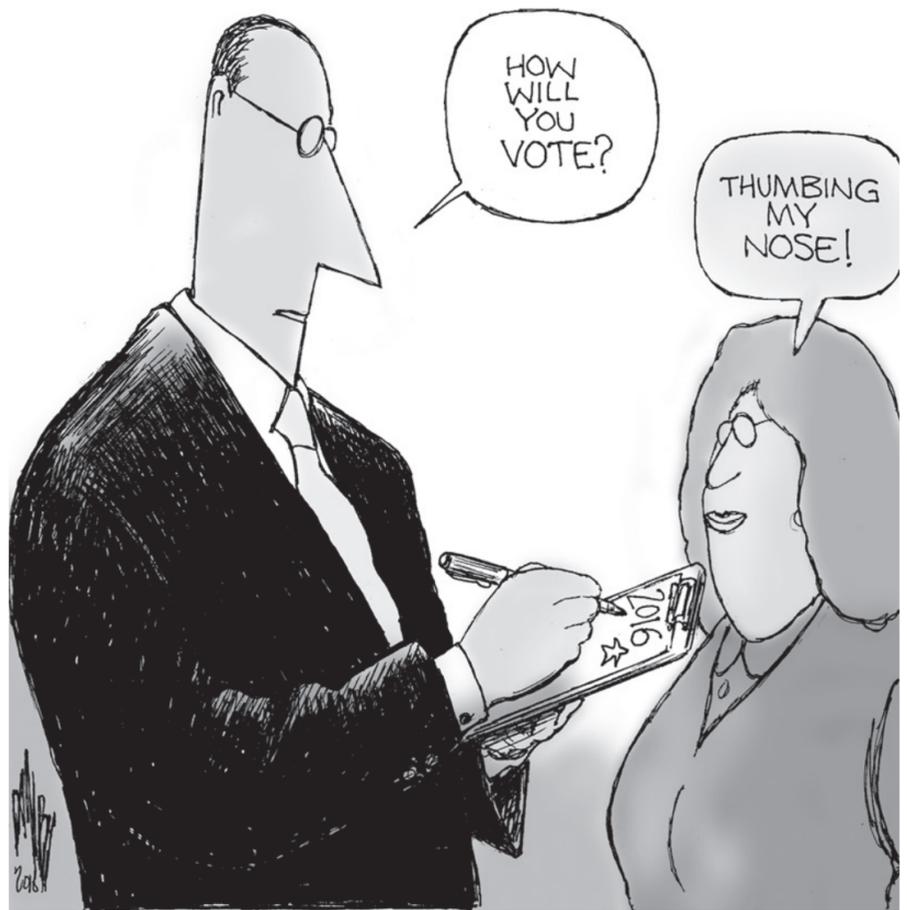
makes their jobs more difficult. They actually amount to a punishment of Maine residents. Such efforts to escape accountability have the effect of leaving Maine's residents — those who pay the salaries of government officials and who are often most affected by government decisions — in the dark. When government officials filter news and information only through their favored channels, there is no assurance that the public gets the full story. Usually, they don't.

The idea of the press as a watchdog on government is as old as America. Founding Father Thomas Jefferson was especially vocal about the need for a free press. In a 1787 letter about the need for the people to “censor” their government, he wrote, “were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

Maine residents would not have known about the misuse of TANF funds without dogged reporting by Matthew Stone of the BDN, who pieced together documents and interviews to confirm that the Department of Health and Human Services had shifted money away from poor families and children.

Without the BDN's Adanya Lustig and Erin Rhoda reporting on the state's ineffective infant mortality review board, Mainers wouldn't know that Maine babies are dying at alarming rates and that no one knows exactly why and what to do about it. Without Stone's reporting, Mainers wouldn't know about a Department of Health and Human Services decision to turn back the remainder of a federal grant to support young adult mental health services. The Department of Health and Human Services — which called the move “a smart reduction in the size of government” — would never have been forced to explain its actions, disingenuously or not.

As government and politicians become less transparent and less accountable to those they work for, the value of investigative journalism is greater than ever.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Not buying reform

I read with great interest the Sept. 19 BDN article about Rep. Bruce Poliquin's push for Social Security reform to help public servants. I am one of those who has written to Poliquin and Sens. Susan Collins and Angus King about this issue.

Poliquin asks for patience. The bottom line is that if our legislators truly wanted to do what is fair and honest, they would have changed this law a long time ago.

We who paid into Social Security earned those benefits. There is no reason why some states cut into the benefits we earned. If I retired from teaching today, after 10 years, my combined income from Maine state retirement system and Social Security would be less than \$800 per month, out of which my health insurance of \$300 would be deducted first.

Like many others, I had all my quarters in with Social Security before changing careers. Having discussed this with other teachers, we are convinced that once again Poliquin is pulling a publicity stunt to further his campaign.

If the legislators truly intended to do what is right, they could literally do it in a matter of days. Good try by Poliquin, but it won't get him my vote this time.

Jo Duhaime
Hancock

Park a wilderness gem

I arrived at South Branch Pond Campground at the northern end of Baxter State Park on a rainy day recently and hiked into my campsite and started a campfire to warm up.

Over the next couple of days, I viewed the lake and surrounding mountains from North Traveler Mountain. I rented a canoe to cross the lake to the Howe Brook Trail and hiked to Howe Brook Falls. Canoeing back to our camp site I could see Mount Katahdin in the afternoon light beyond Pogy Notch across Upper South Branch Pond. That evening an almost full moon shone across the lake to my site. There was only the sound of silence.

There were no dogs barking or radios blaring, and the few people I saw weren't missing the views and the experience because they were texting. There are no tourist trap stores to buy souvenirs. The only souvenirs are the memories and a restored spirit.

Baxter is different than other parks and camp-

grounds. It needs someone diligently watching over it so it doesn't become what everywhere else has become. Let's be grateful that the stewards of Baxter are being true to the intent. Baxter isn't about how quickly you can achieve something, it's about slowing down and appreciating what you already have.

If you've never been, it's worth giving yourself a few days and making the trip. The park rangers are very helpful, friendly and work really hard.

Nora West
New Portland

WRITE TO US

Letters must be 250 words or fewer and include a full name, town of residence and daytime phone number. OpEds may be 700 words. Letters may be edited or rejected for clarity, taste, libel and space. If a letter or OpEd is published, submissions by the same writer will not be considered for 60 days.

Letters may be sent to letters@bangordailynews.com. OpEds may be sent to OpEd@bangordailynews.com or P.O. Box 1329, Bangor, ME 04402-1329.

LePage accountable

It's the same old, same old. One side says we need to do something about the bully in the Blaine House after his latest controversy, and the other side says let's just forget it and move on. To me, this is disgraceful. We need a new leader in the Blaine House.

The truth is the truth, and the facts are the facts. Maine people deserve representatives with courage. We send people to Augusta to lead and make those tough decisions. Stop the nonsense of sweeping things under the rug and lead our state.

Doug Pooler
Dexter

Gun owners liable

There are two arguments opponents to Questions 3 — the referendum on universal background check on all gun transfers — use all the time. Even legislators.

Opponents say the law is not enforceable. Of course it is enforceable. In the same way all laws are enforced. Do you speed? Are you caught every time? How do you get caught? What happens when you are caught? The background check law will be enforced the same way. You will either be caught when a sting is set up or when a gun shows up at a crime scene. The law associated with Question 3 is

very enforceable.

Opponents say the law hurts hunters who wish to loan their gun to a good buddy. The “good buddy” argument is flawed if you think about it for just a few minutes. Sure, you trust your good buddy. So do all good buddies trust theirs. If the good buddy argument works for one, it has to work for all. By all accounts — if you are to believe those who use that argument — we have good buddies all over Maine loaning their guns. All kinds of good buddies and all kinds of reasons. And right now it is legal to do that. But is it something we want to continue or stop? That is the question that Question 3 is asking.

Vote yes on Question 3 to hold all who own a gun accountable for that gun.

Mary Royal
Winterport

War on government

In recent weeks, thanks to the Bangor Daily News reporting, I have learned that the LePage administration has cut the ranks of public health nurses in the state by half and rejected \$3 million from a five-year federal grant to help youth ages 16 to 25 receive mental health care. Now, the administration stands to make matters even worse by contracting with a New York-based firm to manage the \$62.5 million ASPIRE job training, employment and volunteer opportunities program, which helps recipients of TANF, among others.

Do Maine's senators and representatives in the Legislature support privatizing a \$62.5 million public program? The Maine Department of Health and Human Services plans to have this out-of-state firm oversee job training and other services for public assistance recipients in Maine, and I am horrified.

This reminds me of 2014 when DHHS Commissioner Mary Mayhew and Gary Alexander of the Alexander Group testified about our state's Medicaid program, and then we found out the report contained plagiarized passages. We Mainers deserve better. Mainers deserve to have state-run programs that are well run and well managed by state employees.

To prevent Maine residents from losing assistance and Maine civil servants and taxpayers losing their jobs, vote on Nov. 8 to elect Democratic senators and representatives to the Legislature who will stand up to out of control Gov. Paul LePage.

Rev. Charles Stephens
Blue Hill

OTHER VOICES

SELF-DRIVING CARS NEED RULES

Most of us view driverless cars as some sci-fi thing from the future. Actually, they're here, and the derby to bring them to market is revolutionizing the auto industry.

So this week's release of guidelines by federal auto safety regulators for “autonomous vehicles” has been welcome. Self-driving Google cars are all over Silicon Valley. Driverless Ubers cruise the streets of Pittsburgh. Ford has plans to put AVs on the road within five years, and advocates are beside themselves with the implications for drunken driving and the elderly.

Car designers are marketing swiveling seats and steering wheels that retract when a vehicle is on autopilot. Meanwhile, in May, a tech consultant in Florida was killed when his Tesla, in autonomous mode, plowed into a big rig.

In other words, the technology is beginning to outpace the culture. Yet the rules around autonomous vehicles so far have been a confusing patchwork. California, for example, passed some of the first — and most cautious — AV laws in 2012. Innovations have put draft regulations here more than a year behind.

The intercession of the U.S. Department of Transportation “took a little longer than we would have hoped, but this is a big milestone,” Secretary of State Alex Padilla, a former state senator and author of

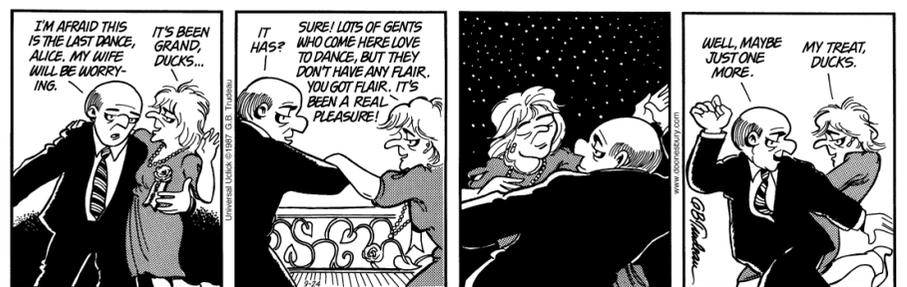
California's law, told a Sacramento Bee editorial board member on Tuesday. He's right: The federal standards steer deftly between commerce and consumer safety, balancing commercial interests such as Tesla, Apple and Google with drivers' and the public's concerns.

They spell out a comprehensive safety and transparency checklist for manufacturers who have so far largely operated in secret. And they make it clear that unsafe vehicles will be swiftly recalled. They also clarify federal and state responsibilities for regulation, giving car makers the consistent playing field for which they've been waiting. Some big differences do remain between the dozen or so states that have passed laws. California, for instance, requires licensed drivers to remain at the wheel as backup, while Florida doesn't. Regulators should err on the side of safety until innovation makes those disparities moot.

Rolled out with an upbeat OpEd by President Barack Obama in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, the policy also reminded that government and red tape don't have to go together, and complex national debates needn't end unproductively. These new rules aren't just about cars; they're about the future, which, for the first time in a while, seemed this week to be like an open road.

The Sacramento Bee (Sept. 21)

DOONESBURY



GARRY TRUDEAU