

Iowa Politics Roundup: Branstad Makes Supreme Court Picks

Written by Lynn Campbell

Saturday, 26 February 2011 21:17

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Iowa will join Idaho and Indiana as the only states whose high courts have only men, following Governor Terry Branstad's February 23 appointment of Pleasant Valley attorney Thomas Waterman, Iowa Court of Appeals Judge Edward Mansfield, and Iowa District Court Judge Bruce Zager to the Iowa Supreme Court.

Branstad said the 51-year-old Waterman, an attorney in the Quad Cities law firm Lane & Waterman, brings private-sector experience to the Supreme Court. He said 58-year-old Zager, of Waterloo, brings both private-practice experience and district-court knowledge to the Supreme Court. And he said 53-year-old Mansfield, of Des Moines, brings both private-practice experience and court-of-appeals knowledge to the Supreme Court.

The three were selected from nine people chosen by the Iowa Judicial Nominating Commission. They will replace former Justices Marsha Ternus, Michael Streit, and David Baker, who were ousted in the November election.

Campaign-finance records show that Waterman contributed \$7,500 to Branstad's campaign and \$250 to Brenna Findley, his legal counsel who ran unsuccessfully for attorney general.

Branstad notably did not select 37-year-old University of Iowa law professor Angela Onwauchi-Willig, the only woman among the nine nominees. The governor repeatedly expressed his disappointment that the names of more women weren't forwarded to him, and

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noted that Onwauchi-Willig only obtained a license to practice in Iowa on January 27.

No date has been set for the investitures of the new justices, but all three will face their first retention vote in November 2012, along with current Justice David Wiggins, according to spokesperson for the judicial branch and governor.

The justices will be sworn in by March 25 as required by law, said Branstad spokesperson Tim Albrecht.

Capitol Hosts Hundreds for Labor Demonstration

Iowa Democratic lawmakers and congressmen joined as many as 1,000 members of labor unions in speaking out against legislation targeting collective bargaining at a February 22 rally on the west steps of the Capitol.

The workers held signs saying things such as “We are your neighbors,” “Jobs worth fighting for,” “Stop the attack on Iowa working families,” and “Double-dipping Terry: Hire your own chef and housekeeper.” A guitar played as a worker sang pro-union songs. State troopers monitored the rally, which appeared to be peaceful.

U.S. Representative Bruce Braley (D-Waterloo) wore the boots that he said he wore 30 years ago when he worked for the Poweshiek County Secondary Road Department.

“The middle class and working men and women are under attack, and it’s our job to set the record straight,” Braley said. “We’re here today to say, ‘Wake up America. Wake up before your rights are taken right out from under your arms.’ Instead of blaming employees, we should be thanking employees. They’re the ones who clean the toilets in your public buildings. They’re the ones who teach your children. They’re the ones who get up in the middle of the night to plow your roads, plow your streets.”

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Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal (D-Council Bluffs) pointed to the Iowa Capitol, and specifically to the House chamber controlled by Republicans this year, and said: "You can't believe all the bad things being introduced in the building behind us, mostly on that side."

Matthew Miller of Omaha, a member of Communications Workers of America, made the two-hour drive by himself to join the Iowa rally.

"If they attack anybody, they're attacking everybody," Miller said. "It's a domino effect. They're going to start with the state workers and then they're going to go to the private ones. They're trying to get rid of unions, and unions are the only thing keeping sure that our wages stay equal."

An hour earlier, a much smaller group of between 50 and 60 Tea Party supporters rallied on the west steps of the Capitol, urging union members to pay their share at a time that the nation and states are in debt.

House Passes Collective-Bargaining Changes After Marathon Debate

Democrats on the Iowa House Labor Committee made it as painful as possible for committee Republicans to approve sweeping changes to the state's collective-bargaining law, forcing a debate that lasted all night Thursday and didn't end until just after 6 a.m. Friday following a 9-5 party-line vote.

Democrats offered roughly 50 amendments to the bill, making committee debate, including caucuses, last a total of 15 hours. All amendments were rejected on party-line votes. Democrats said they were willing to stay as long as it took to protect workers. The new House rule that there shall be no votes taken between midnight and 8 a.m. doesn't apply to committee action.

House Labor Committee Chair Lance Horbach (R-Tama) agreed to a public hearing on the issue after one was requested by Democrats. He also said several times this week that a provision in the bill that would give the legislature power to ratify collective-bargaining agreements will likely be removed from the bill.

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House Study Bill 117 says a public employee has the right to declare his- or herself a free agent. Health insurance would be excluded from the scope of collective bargaining, and public employees would pay 30 percent of their health-insurance plan. The bill would require arbitrators to consider comparisons with nonunion workers and the private sector, and whether taxes would be increased.

“I recognize that this bill generates a lot of emotions on both sides. I understand that and I respect that,” Representative Ron Jorgensen (R-Sioux City), the bill’s floor manager, said in opening comments. “The intent of this bill is to both provide a fair and equitable compensation plan for public employees while also recognizing what’s in the best interests of local communities, the state of Iowa, and its taxpayers.”

The committee initially began meeting at 1 p.m., but Republicans and Democrats immediately went into closed-door caucuses after opening comments. The meeting reconvened at 4 p.m. but broke several times for caucuses. Senate Majority Leader Gronstal said earlier in the day that the bill repeals collective bargaining for public employees and won’t see the light of day in the Senate.

“Make no mistake about it: The Republican bill will end collective bargaining and take away rights from police officers, firefighters, state troopers, teachers, and prison guards,” said Representative Bruce Hunter (D-Des Moines), ranking member of the House Labor Committee. “Instead of creating new jobs and opportunities for working families in Iowa, we are taking away their rights and punishing Iowa’s middle class.”

Santorum Tweaks Obama on Gay Marriage, Middle East Protests

Former U.S. Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania said Thursday on *Iowa Press* that he is disappointed in the Obama administration for declaring the Defense of Marriage Act unconstitutional this week.

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“This was a way for the feds to preserve sovereignty of the states [regarding the legalization of gay marriage], instead of favoring one side,” Santorum said. “What Obama has essentially done, over the course of two years, was go from finding this law to be fine and constitutional to completely unconstitutional. I don’t think the language of the bill has changed. This was move driven by politics.” The Obama administration on February 23 notified Congress that it would no longer defend aspects of the Defense of Marriage Act in court.

Santorum, who is Catholic, said the best situation for children is to be raised by both a mother and father.

“All I can say is that if we do not, as a party and a people, stand behind the institution of marriage as the glue that holds the family together, we are going to destine for our children a lower standard of living,” he said. “A truce, in this case [of the same-sex marriage issue], means giving seeding ground to the other side.”

Santorum said that regardless of whether he seeks the presidency, he will continue to speak up on issues impacting the U.S. political landscape.

Santorum expressed disappointment in the Obama administration’s handling of protests and turmoil in Cairo and Libya, accusing the president of flip-flopping and indicating enemies would be lent U.S. support.

“Not only am I disappointed in Obama’s handling of the Middle East, I’m also disappointed what led up to how it was handled,” Santorum said, claiming the Obama administration promoted political freedom in nations under oppressive regimes then “supported the ruling regime against a pro-democracy revolution” in Iran.

“Eighteen months later, in Egypt, where the ruler was a friend of the U.S., did he choose to side with our friend? No, he sided with the protesters, and said [Egyptian President Honsi] Mubarak had to go,” Santorum said. “He tells our nation’s friends, ‘If you get in trouble, don’t come to us for help,’ and to our enemies, ‘If you get in trouble, we’ll help you.’”

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Thursday marked Santorum's 10th visit to Iowa since the last presidential election. "Expectations are low for someone like me," he admitted. "I'm still walking through this process [of deciding whether to run]. Right now, my feeling is: Go out and deliver the message, [and] talk about what this nation needs."

Santorum said he does not know when he will make a decision, citing funding as a major factor. "The money's not there right now," he said. "The economy has taken a hit in the last two years. You need fuel in the tank, and there's no fuel right now."

Barbour to Decide in April on 2012 Run

Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, who visited the Iowa Capitol on Monday to meet Branstad and legislative leaders, said he's exploring whether to run for president in 2012 but won't make a decision until April.

Barbour, former chair of both the Republican Governors Association and Republican National Committee, said he did not directly ask Branstad for his support should he run.

"Told him that I'm thinking about running, [and I'm] not going to make a decision until April, and it's unfair to ask people to make a commitment to you if you haven't even made a final decision to run," Barbour said. "I wouldn't do that to my friends."

The Mississippi governor said his age and the length of the commitment involved in being president are factors in the decision by him and his wife, who have been married for 39 years.

"I have been political director of the White House under Ronald Reagan; I understand what I'm getting into," Barbour said. "I'm 63 years old, and this is a 10-year commitment. If you run and get elected, you're committing yourself for re-election, so you've got to be prepared for a 10-year commitment, and that's the majority of the rest of my productive life, and you have to decide: Am I willing to take on the most consuming job in the world ... ? And I have to see whether I've got the fire in the belly and the willingness to the exclusion of all other things to take that on. It's a serious decision."

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Barbour said his decision will come in April because that's when the Mississippi legislative session ends.

"I don't believe in running for the next job until I've finished the job I've got," he said.

Barbour is not scheduled to attend the Iowa Faith & Freedom Coalition's Spring Event and presidential forum March 7 in Waukee but will headline the Chairman's Dinner on Tuesday, March 15, in the Quad Cities to kick off the Republican Party of Iowa's year-long series of events designed to support and prepare county organizations for the 2012 presidential cycle. Barbour also said he'll be back in late March.

"I will be back in Iowa several times before I make a decision," he said.

The Mississippi governor called for a scaling back of all entitlements, defense, and farm subsidies.

This weekly summary comes from IowaPolitics.com, an online government and politics news service