

Republicans need to stand up to band of rigid intimidators

By Joe Hallett

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Where are the voices of reason? When will responsible Republicans come forward and confront the political intimidators?

Those questions cried out for answers Tuesday in the hours before Gov. John Kasich delivered his third State of the State address, perhaps the best speech of his governorship.

Before Kasich took the stage in Lima, a fringe group had sent an unmistakable message to GOP lawmakers in the audience:

If you do what Kasich wants, we will take you out in the 2014 primary election.

In a press release entitled “Replacing the RINO’s (Republican in name only) who support Kasich’s Medicaid expansion,” the Ohio Liberty Council warned:

“We are holding the line against the governor’s proposed budget on no new sales taxes on services, no increase of the severance tax, and absolutely, positively NO expansion of Medicaid in Ohio.”

The council, a network of tea party and liberty groups, then listed the names of Republicans on the House Finance and Appropriations Committee, which will handle Kasich’s \$63.3 billion two-year budget.

It also listed the estimated number of votes needed to defeat them in the primary election if they support the budget.

March in lockstep with our ideology or you will pay — the message couldn’t have been clearer.

As noted here before, the tea party has valuably honed in on the spending and debt crisis threatening future generations.

But the group's no-more-spending and no-tax-hikes under any circumstances mantra undermines well-targeted investments crucial to the development of our children and grandchildren.

Kasich's plan to lower and expand the state sales tax to include dozens of services is sensible, although lawmakers should surgically exempt taxing services that could cause significant job losses.

And Kasich's modest severance tax on an oil and gas industry reaping huge profits from Ohio's shale boom is fair.

Most disturbing about the Liberty Council's threat is its knee-jerk opposition to a unique and money-saving opportunity to extend health care to 275,000 poor Ohioans, mostly children.

Almost every thoughtful group that has studied the proposed Medicaid expansion has endorsed it, from conservative business groups, to Ohio Right to Life, to advocates for the mentally ill, to the editorial pages of Ohio's biggest newspapers.

In his Tuesday night speech, Kasich passionately defended the plan: "I can't look at the disabled, I can't look at the poor, I can't look at the mentally ill, I can't look at the addicted and think we ought to ignore them," he said.

"For those that live in the shadows of life, those who are the least among us, I will not accept the fact that the most vulnerable in our state should be ignored."

And yet, that's what Republicans who control the legislature seem poised to do. The reason: Most hold safe seats in gerrymandered districts, and they fear losing a GOP primary to a challenger running farther to the right.

Hence, fringe groups such as the Liberty Council have been empowered, and their threats cannot be ignored.

"As long as you are building districts that are safe for both parties, you've given up the middle and you've reinforced both extremes," Edward "Ned" Hill, dean of the Levin College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University, told me recently.

The Liberty Council's threat was met with shameful silence by Republican leaders. Doesn't the party have an obligation to support its governor and protect its incumbent legislators? I asked the top leaders of the Ohio GOP, Chairman Robert T. Bennett and Executive Director Matt Borges. Both demurred.

"There's not a single lawmaker who has yet voted" on the budget, Borges said, contending that it is premature to draw conclusions.

“We endorsed incumbent Republicans who have supported Republican policies,” Bennett said. “We do not have a litmus test that they have to be 100 percent for us.”

If Republican leaders don’t confront the ideologically intractable intimidators they have enabled through gerrymandering, the chances for good public policies in this state are bleak.

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