

Connections among men in ethics case raise doubts

By Senator Hollis French

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Attorney General Gregg Renkes is dragging his feet. He is supposed to be investigating Republican Party chairman Randy Ruedrich's alleged misuse of state resources. The incident came to light in November 2003. At that time, Ruedrich was both the Republican Party chairman and a Murkowski appointee to the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, drawing a state salary of \$118,000 per year. Ruedrich resigned from the AOGCC when allegations surfaced that a staffer saw "hundreds" of e-mails on Ruedrich's state computer dealing with Republican Party business.

If the allegations are true, Ruedrich would be in violation of the state Ethics Act, among other things. The person in charge of Ethics Acts investigations is the attorney general. So now it's up to Mr. Renkes to decide if there is probable cause to believe that Ruedrich violated the act. Probable cause is not a difficult legal hurdle to get over. Street cops make arrests every day based on probable cause. So what is taking Renkes so long?

The disturbing thing is that we may never know. Under the Ethics Act, Renkes' investigation is strictly confidential. Furthermore, the attorney general can take up to two years to complete his task. As long as he is still "investigating," the complaint and all other documents and information related to the investigation, Renkes can try to keep them closed to public inspection. Given the straightforward nature of the AG's inquiry, one has to wonder why the shroud of secrecy that cloaks an Ethics Act investigation is still in place.

This is not a complex web of financial transactions that Renkes has to decipher. His job is to examine the e-mails and see what time they were sent and to whom. If it appears that Ruedrich was sitting in front of his state computer, at his state-provided desk, in a state-provided office and conducting Republican Party business while on the state payroll, then the inquiry is complete. Renkes' duty at that point is to file an accusation against Ruedrich and begin the public process of a hearing before the state personnel board.

If and when Renkes decides there is probable cause to believe that Ruedrich violated the Ethics Act, that finding will free citizens like Sarah Palin and others who worked at the commission while Ruedrich was there to tell the public what they know. Once the public phase of this begins, the genie is out of the bottle.

Are the relationships among Renkes, Ruedrich and Gov. Murkowski the reason behind the delay? Renkes and Gov. Murkowski go back more than a decade to when Renkes ran then-Sen. Murkowski's 1992 re-election campaign. Renkes managed the 1998 and 2002 campaigns too. Ruedrich has been credited with reinvigorating the Republican Party in the period leading up to the 2002 elections.

Those relationships are a large part of the reason that several of my colleagues and I have called for an independent investigation of the Ruedrich affair. There is too close a connection among Renkes, Ruedrich and Gov. Murkowski to believe that a thorough, complete, no-holds-barred investigation is taking place.

When one politician investigates another, the public has good reason to be doubtful about the outcome. The way to instill public confidence in Renkes' investigation is for him to assign the task to someone completely unconnected to the Department of Law. Our government must be open and accountable.