

A long string of blunders for Kevin de León

By Dan Walters

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Kevin de León, president pro tem of the state Senate for just a few weeks, has already run up a remarkable string of political missteps and gaffes.

And that's why Capitol insiders are beginning to speculate on how long de León can last – especially since Democrats have a pro-tem-in-waiting named Bob Hertzberg, a former Assembly speaker just elected to the Senate.

Even before being installed in the Senate's top position, de León demonstrated obliviousness.

Take, for example, his remarks to Los Angeles Times columnist George Skelton in June about beginning the bullet train project in the San Joaquin Valley.

"I don't think it makes sense to lay down track in the middle of nowhere," de León told Skelton. "It's illogical. No one lives out there in the tumbleweeds."

Those living "in the middle of nowhere" understandably took umbrage. "De León came off as arrogant and someone far more interested in taking care of people in his home district than attending to the needs of all Californians," The Fresno Bee editorialized.

De León belatedly recognized his gaffe, visited Fresno and made amends, but the state Republican Party used de León's graceless remark to help GOP Sen. Andy Vidak win re-election.

The party dispatched a mailer to 14th Senate District voters picturing Democrat Luis Chavez with de León and quoting the "tumbleweeds" epithet. Vidak defeated Chavez by a 54 percent to 46 percent margin despite a lopsided Democratic registration edge.

Did de León learn a lesson about being more cognizant in word and deed? Apparently not. In October, he staged an elaborate "inauguration" in downtown Los Angeles costing \$50,000 – money donated to a Latino political fund by corporate interests – and earning him more bad press.

Then, after taking office, de León dumped dozens of Senate staffers, claiming a budget shortfall forced his hand but never providing hard financial data.

It not only has all the earmarks of a purge, but by exempting senators' personal staffs while slashing professionals who provided objective analysis of issues and pending legislation, it sharply decreases transparency and accountability.

Finally, de León unveiled a plan this week to give universities more money, with some shifted from a "middle class scholarship" program that was the pet project of former Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez

De León insists it's merely an effort to stretch out the money. "We don't just focus on tens of thousands of students but rather hundreds of thousands of students who could be eligible," he said.

However, the two were bitter rivals for the speakership. At the very least, de León's announcement, coming just one day after he had urged his colleagues to set aside petty politics and adopt "a sense sense of both urgency and humility," could easily spark a feud with the Assembly.

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