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Letter: Florida Crystals can help restore Everglades

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09/08/2009
Orlando Sentinel
Thom Rumberger

Florida Crystals can help restore Everglades

In a recent letter to the editor, Gaston Cantens of Florida Crystals Corp. touts the sugar industry's interest in pollution reduction, suggesting this is a long-standing objective of that business.

Cantens fails to note that the principal reason there is less pollution today from sugar-cane farming in the Everglades is that the federal government is now requiring a stricter standard than in the past. While the sugar companies have spent money on cleaning up some of the ugliness they have created over many years, it should be vigorously pointed out that the taxpayers have spent hundreds of millions more.

In fact, every taxpayer in South Florida chips in to treat the water flowing from Cantens' employer's fields before it can enter the Everglades.

I do agree with the Everglades Agricultural Area farmers that too much pollution is getting into Lake Okeechobee and that pollution is complicating efforts to clean up the Everglades.

Why not clean up both?

We can use the land to be purchased from U.S. Sugar to treat and store water, and we can work with the landowners north of Lake Okeechobee to reduce their use of chemicals.

We also suggest that Florida Crystals Corp. join those truly interested in Everglades restoration by providing land (at a fair profit) and refraining from filing lawsuits at every juncture to slow or impede the cleansing of America's treasure.

Thom Rumberger Chairman,

Everglades Trust

Work by incoming Sen. LeMieux, his law firm draws scrutiny

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09/07/2009

Miami Herald, The

STEVE BOUSQUET, MARY ELLEN KLAS AND MARC CAPUTO

When Gov. Charlie Crist anointed George LeMieux as Florida's new U.S. senator, he did more than hand his closest adviser the plum job of a lifetime. With a hug and a handshake, Crist transformed LeMieux from a little-known insider ("George LeWho?" one paper asked) to a major political figure, suddenly thrust into a spotlight that's illuminating how his public service brought him private profit.

Amid charges of political cronyism and claims he was picked to be the governor's proxy in Washington, there is renewed scrutiny of LeMieux's dealings and those of his law firm, Gunster Yoakley & Stewart, on multiple fronts:

The law firm, chaired by LeMieux, helped foreign workers get visas last fall to help build a hotel and condos in Miami, depriving dozens of Floridians jobs at a time of rising unemployment. CBS4 News in Miami first reported the law firm's efforts, which included persuading the U.S. State Department that the Mexican workers had special skills that Americans didn't. In a statement, the firm said Le-Mieux had no involvement in immigration matters. While serving as Crist's chief of staff in 2007, LeMieux secretly helped negotiate a lucrative gambling agreement with the Seminole Tribe of Florida that was struck down by the Florida Supreme Court as unconstitutional and has triggered a debate over the expansion of gambling in Florida. LeMieux recently helped negotiate a second compact that the Legislature will consider this fall. He has said the compact will contribute more money to Florida schools and will limit future expansion of gambling.

Two weeks before Le-Mieux left Crist's office, Gunster Yoakley & Stewart landed a \$500,000 contract representing the state Department of Transportation on two matters. DOT general counsel Alexis Yarbrough, who signed the contract on Dec. 20, 2007, is the wife of Shane Strum, a deputy chief of staff who reported to LeMieux when LeMieux worked for Crist. LeMieux said he played no role in his firm's hiring; DOT has said the firm has special expertise in arcane railroad law. The firm did work for DOT before LeMieux returned there.

After leaving Crist's office in December 2007, LeMieux earned about \$150,000 over a 13-month period as an adviser to state Republican Party chairman Jim Greer, a sideline that has led some to label LeMieux a "political consultant." He will not discuss what he did to earn that money, which was paid from the party's federal account to his firm, MTC Strategies (named after his sons Max, Taylor, and Chase).

For the past 15 years, West Palm Beach-based Gunster Yoakley has represented U.S. Sugar Corp., which for months negotiated with Crist's office to sell much of its land to the state and federal government to clean up polluted runoff in the Everglades. LeMieux said he avoided any involvement in the U.S. Sugar deal while working for Crist or afterward. The state's chief negotiator was Eric Eikenberg, a LeMieux protg who succeeded him as chief of staff.

REJECTED LOBBYING

LeMieux, 40, will become the youngest member of the world's most exclusive club when he's sworn in Thursday by Vice President Joe Biden in the Senate chamber.

The soft-spoken Republican appointee emphasized that unlike many of his predecessors who advised governors, he avoided the temptation of millions of dollars in hefty fees he could have earned as a lobbyist.

"I can only think of three former chiefs of staff [to governors] that came out and didn't lobby," LeMieux said in an interview. "I wanted to lawyer, and I could have lobbied every agency the day I left . . . and I didn't do that. I went back to being a lawyer."

LeMieux must resign from the firm to serve as a senator, and in Washington he will have to cast votes on immigration and agricultural issues that could affect Gunster Yoakley's clients. To date, he has declined to release a full list of his law firm's clients, citing attorney-client privilege, but has said he will fully comply with Senate disclosure laws. "I have 30 days to file it. I will comply with whatever the law requires," LeMieux said.

' POLITICS AS USUAL'

Crist said he was not concerned about questions of Le-Mieux's business dealings.

`` I know of his personal integrity, his professional integrity," Crist said. `` And I'm comfortable with that."

The governor, himself a 2010 candidate for the seat that Le-Mieux will keep warm for the next 16 months, said he settled on LeMieux over eight other possible appointees late on the night of Aug. 27. The pool included one current and two former members of Congress.

LeMieux's appointment has brought cries of cronyism from predictable quarters, such as the Florida Democratic Party. But a random sampling of constituent e-mail to the governor last week -- selected by Crist's staff -- shows rank-and-file Floridians are deeply divided over the decision.

`` Politics as usual," Richard Smith of St. Petersburg wrote to Crist. `` I wonder if your principles extend beyond your own political ambitions."

CRIST'S OPPONENT

The leading critic is the governor's Republican U.S. Senate rival, former House Speaker Marco Rubio, who is especially critical of LeMieux's role in negotiating the gambling compact with the Seminole Tribe.

Rubio, an opponent of gambling, said that during the compact negotiations, the Tribe donated at least \$700,000 to the Republican Party of Florida, and that LeMieux was a paid party consultant during the same period.

`` Whose interests were represented in those talks?" Rubio said. `` Was it the people's? Or was it George LeMieux's or Charlie Crist's?"

Rubio also criticized the U.S. Sugar deal, saying the state will pay more for the land than its appraised value. `` It's a bailout of the company," Rubio said. `` It's a complete one-sided deal. Same thing with the Seminole deal, and the common denominator of both is George Le-Mieux."

Said LeMieux: `` I think that the speaker thinks he's running against me."

DEMOCRATIC PRAISE

Some Democrats have praised Crist's pick. They include U.S. Rep. Robert Wexler, D-Boca Raton; Fort Lauderdale Mayor Jack Seiler, a former Democratic legislator; and former Attorney General Bob Butterworth, who served as a child-welfare secretary under Crist. LeMieux, like Crist, is seen as a moderate who frequently consulted with Democrats on policy matters.

`` George is politically mature much more than his years," said Butterworth, who worked closely with LeMieux. `` I think the world of George LeMieux. He's a moderate, and he cares about the issues."

REPUBLICAN ANGER

At the same time, some Republicans are outraged. Ed Havill, the elected property appraiser in suburban Orlando's Lake County for 33 years, said he switched his party affiliation from Republican to Independent in protest over the appointment.

`` By choosing his 2006 campaign manager, George Le-Mieux, the governor decisively demonstrated two things," Havill wrote in an Orlando Sentinel op-ed. `` He is only interested in what's best for Charlie Crist, and he has utter contempt for what's best for Floridians."

' I'M MY OWN MAN'

Crist said he appointed Le-Mieux because he's a man of utmost integrity who will faithfully represent the best interests of Floridians. The two men appear to be political clones of each other, and joke that all they disagree on is their pro-football loyalties: Crist likes the Bucs and LeMieux, a Broward native, likes the Dolphins.

`` Obviously, the governor and I share a lot of common beliefs. I think that's a part of the reason I think he felt comfortable appointing me," LeMieux said. `` But I'm my own man and I'm going to call them like I see them and do what's right for the people of Florida."

LeMieux planned to fly to Washington over the weekend to make final preparations to take Mel Martinez's place -- and to be called "senator" for the rest of his life.

Herald/Times staff writer Shannon Colavecchio contributed to this report. Steve Bousquet can be reached at bousquet@sptimes.com

George LeMieux Del anonimato al Capitolio

09/07/2009

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El Nuevo Herald

Cuando el gobernador Charlie Crist ungió a George LeMieux como el nuevo senador federal de la Florida, hizo algo más que entregar a su asesor más cercano el empleo más jugoso de su vida.

Con un abrazo y un apretón de manos, Crist transformó a LeMieux de una eminencia gris poco conocida ("¿George LeQuién?", preguntó un periódico) a una figura política importante, súbitamente colocada bajo un reflector que ilumina.

Entre acusaciones de favoritismo político y de que él fue escogido para representar al gobernador en Washington, ha habido un renovado escrutinio tanto de la trayectoria de LeMieux como la de su firma legal, Gunster Yoakley & Stewart, en múltiples frentes:

* La firma legal, dirigida por LeMieux, ayudó el pasado otoño a trabajadores extranjeros a conseguir visas para ayudar a construir un hotel y condominios en Miami, privando de empleos a decenas de trabajadores de la Florida en un momento en que aumentaba el desempleo. CBS4 News en Miami fue la primera en reportar los esfuerzos de la firma, que incluyeron persuadir al Departamento de Estado federal de que los trabajadores mexicanos tenían habilidades de las que carecían los estadounidenses. En una declaración, la firma dijo que LeMieux no se había involucrado en asunto migratorio alguno.

* Mientras trabajaba como jefe de estado mayor de Crist en el 2007, LeMieux ayudó en secreto a negociar un lucrativo acuerdo de juego con la tribu seminola de la Florida que el Tribunal Supremo de la Florida derogó por inconstitucional, y que ha suscitado un debate sobre la expansión del juego en la Florida. LeMieux ayudó recientemente a negociar un segundo tratado que la Legislatura considerará este otoño. El dijo que el tratado contribuirá más dinero a las escuelas de la Florida y limitará la expansión futura del juego.

* Dos semanas antes de que LeMieux dejara de trabajar para Crist, Gunster Yoakley consiguió un contrato por \$500,000 para representar al Departamento del Transporte (DOT) estatal en dos asuntos.

La asesora general del DOT Alexis Yarbrough, quien firmó el contrato el 20 de diciembre del 2007, es la esposa de Shane Strum, subjefe de estado mayor quien era subordinado de LeMieux cuando él trabajaba para Crist. LeMieux dijo no haber tenido influencia alguna en la contratación de su firma; el DOT ha dicho que la firma se especializaba en abstrusas leyes de ferrocarriles. La firma hizo trabajod para el DOT antes de que LeMieux regresara.

* Luego de salir de la oficina de Crist en diciembre del 2007, LeMieux se ganó unos \$150,000 durante un período de 13 meses como asesor del presidente del Partido Republicano estatal Jim Greer, una lucrativa labor suplementaria que llevó a que algunos calificaran a LeMieux de "asesor político".

El se niega a hablar de lo que hizo para ganarse ese dinero, que la cuenta federal del partido pagó a su firma MTC Strategies (llamada así por las iniciales de sus hijos Max, Taylor y Chase).

* Durante los últimos 15 años, Gunster Yoakley, radicada en West Palm Beach, ha representado a U.S. Sugar Corp., la cual negoció durante meses con la oficina de Crist para vender gran parte de sus tierras a los gobiernos estatal y federal para limpiar la polución en los Everglades. LeMieux dijo haber evitado inmiscuirse en absoluto en el acuerdo con U.S. Sugar, tanto mientras trabajaba para Crist como después. El principal negociador del estado fue Eric Eikenberg, un protegido de LeMieux que lo sucedió como jefe de estado mayor.

LeMieux, de 40 años, se convertirá en el miembro más joven del club más exclusivo del mundo cuando sea juramentado el jueves por el vicepresidente Joe Biden en la cámara del Senado.

El designado republicano al Senado, de modales discretos, subrayó que, a diferencia de muchos de sus predecesores

en la asesoría de los gobernadores, él evitó la tentación de los millones de dólares que podía haber ganado como cabildeero.

"Sólo recuerdo a tres ex jefes de estado mayor (de gobernadores) que dejaran su cargo y no se dedicaran a cabildear", dijo LeMieux en una entrevista. "Yo quería trabajar de abogado, y pude haber cabildeado en todas las agencias cuando me fui. . . y no lo hice. Yo regresé a mi oficio de abogado".

LeMieux tendrá que renunciar a su trabajo en la firma para hacerse senador, y en Washington tendrá que votar sobre asuntos de inmigración y agricultura que podrían afectar los intereses de la clientela de Gunster Yoakley.

Hasta el momento, él se ha negado a revelar una lista completa de la clientela de su firma legal, alegando razones de secreto profesional, pero ha dicho que cumplirá al pie de la letra con las leyes de transparencia del Senado. "Tengo 30 días para presentarla. Yo cumpliré con todo lo que exija la ley", dijo LeMieux.

Crist dijo que no le preocupaba el cuestionamiento de los negocios de LeMieux.

"Yo conozco su integridad personal, su integridad profesional", dijo Crist. "Y estoy tranquilo".

El gobernador, quien es a su vez candidato en el 2010 al mismo puesto que LeMieux ocupará durante los próximos 16 meses, dijo haberse decidido por LeMieux tras considerar otros ocho posibles nominados en la noche del 27 de agosto. Entre los candidatos habían un miembro actual del Congreso y dos ex congresistas.

La designación de LeMieux ha provocado acusaciones de favoritismo por parte de grupos predecibles, como por ejemplo el Partido Demócrata de la Florida. Pero una muestra al azar de los correos electrónicos enviados la semana pasada al gobernador por los constituyentes --escogida por empleados de Crist-- muestran que existe una profunda división de opiniones sobre el tema entre la masa de los floridanos.

"La politiquería de siempre", escribió a Crist Richard Smith de St. Petersburg. "Me pregunto si los principios de usted van más allá de sus ambiciones políticas".

El principal crítico es el rival del gobernador en las próximas elecciones al Senado federal, el ex presidente de la Cámara de Representantes Marco Rubio, quien critica en particular el papel jugado por LeMieux en la negociación del tratado de juego con la tribu seminola.

Rubio, quien se opone al juego, dijo que, durante las negociaciones del tratado, la tribu donó al menos \$700,000 al Partido Republicano de la Florida, y que LeMieux era un asesor pagado del partido durante ese mismo período.

"¿Qué intereses se representaba en esas charlas?", dijo Rubio. "¿Los del pueblo? ¿O los de George LeMieux , o de Charlie Crist ?"

Rubio criticó asimismo el acuerdo con U.S. Sugar deal, diciendo que el estado pagará por esos terrenos más del valor tasado de los mismos. "Eso se llama comprar a la compañía", dijo Rubio. ' 'Es un acuerdo de un solo lado. Lo mismo pasó con el acuerdo de los seminolas, y el denominador común en ambos casos es George LeMieux ''.

LeMieux comentó: "Yo creo que Rubio cree que se va a postular contra mí".

La redactora de The Herald/Times Shannon Colavecchio contribuyó a este reportaje.

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COLUMN Junior senator from Crist

09/06/2009

Palm Beach Post - Online

Randy Schultz

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Palm Beach Post Editor of the Editorial Page

In modern Florida politics, no man has meant more to a governor than George LeMieux has to Charlie Crist. The relationship has worked out for them, but not necessarily for the state.

Other governors have had strong aides. Bob Graham had Charley Reed, later chancellor of Florida's university system. Bob Martinez had J.M. "Mac" Stipanovich, who later told Katherine Harris to bring Florida's 2000 election "in for a landing." Others had confidants. Jeb Bush and ex-House Speaker John Thrasher were golf buddies and ideological soul mates.

No pair, though, was like this. Mr. LeMieux was Attorney General Charlie Crist's top aide between 2002 and 2006. Mr. LeMieux ran the 2006 Crist for Governor campaign and spent the first year of the administration as chief of staff. In late 2007, he left and became chairman of Gunster Yoakley, one of Florida's largest law firms. Gunster is based in South Florida, but Mr. LeMieux stayed in Tallahassee, close to his power source. They speak constantly.

And nine days ago, Gov. Crist named his alter ego to baby-sit the U.S. Senate seat that the governor wants to win next year. His official title will be Sen. LeMieux, R-Fla., but it might as well be Sen. LeMieux, R-Crist.

If opposites attract, these two are magnetized. Gov. Crist needed three tries to pass the Florida Bar exam. Mr. LeMieux graduated with honors from Emory and Georgetown and has the highest professional rating. Gov. Crist has a killer tan, killer hair and a look of sincerity that he could maintain if waterboarded. Mr. LeMieux could fit in at a convention of property appraisers. Gov. Crist has lost only one election, and that one - a 1998 Senate race against iconic Bob Graham - got him the statewide recognition he had lacked. Mr. LeMieux lost a 1998 race for a state House seat.

Every three minutes, Gov. Crist declares that he makes decisions based on what's best "for the people." The implication is that even though he raises small fortunes for his campaigns, that money matters less than "the people." With Mr. LeMieux, however, the governor makes an exception.

The original U.S. Sugar deal was for the South Florida Water Management District to buy the whole company. U.S. Sugar's law firm is Gunster, which represented the company as the deal shrank to buying 73,000 acres of the company's land. The state's top negotiator was Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Michael Sole. He's a Gulf War vet, but he's not a lawyer or a seasoned negotiator. He reports to Gov. Crist, who wanted the deal very badly, even though an outside consultant estimated that in the second deal, to buy all of U.S. Sugar's land, the state would have been overpaying by about \$200 million.

There are other exceptions. Former Crist policy aide Chanta Combs is now a lobbyist. One of her clients is the Seminole Tribe. For a year, the governor has been trying to seal a gambling compact that gives the tribe exclusive rights to lucrative high-stakes games. In 2005, Chris Kise, then solicitor general under Attorney General Crist, negotiated with Florida Power & Light a delay of the company's rate request until after Mr. Crist ran for governor. In 2009, lobbyist Chris Kise is a consultant to FPL as the company seeks that rate request.

And now Mr. LeMieux will start the Crist 2010 Senate campaign immediately. Conservative Republicans who dominate GOP primaries regard the sometimes-centrist Gov. Crist suspiciously. So, after Gov. Crist appointed him, Mr. LeMieux declared himself to be "pro-life, pro-gun, pro-family." That mixed metaphor is catnip for the Republican base.

That doesn't sound like the George LeMieux who campaigned for the House in 1998. Tracy Stafford, the Democrat who won, said they ran a campaign so free of hot-button issues that "we'd be better off if all campaigns were run that way."

These days, though, the ambitions of Charlie Crist and the ambitions of George LeMieux are the same. When it becomes Sen. LeMieux this week, taxpayers will be subsidizing the relationship. We know what's in it for them. What's in it for Florida?

Randy Schultz is the editor of the editorial page of The Palm Beach Post. His e-mail address is schultz@pbpost.com

Sen. LeMieux face scrutiny on his way to Washington

09/05/2009

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St. Petersburg Times - Online

By Steve Bousquet, Mary Ellen Klas and Marc Caputo, Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

In Print: Sunday, September 6, 2009

George LeMieux and Gov. Charlie Crist have largely similar opinions on most matters. With the exception football. LeMieux likes the Dolphins, while Crist is a long-time Buccaneers fan.

[Associated Press]

Social Bookmarking

TALLAHASSEE — When Gov. Charlie Crist anointed George LeMieux as Florida's new U.S. senator, he did more than hand his closest adviser the plum job of a lifetime.

With a hug and a handshake, Crist transformed LeMieux from a little-known insider ("George LeWho?" one paper asked) to a major political figure, suddenly thrust into a spotlight that's illuminating how his public service brought him private profit.

Amid charges of political cronyism and claims he was picked to be the governor's proxy in Washington, there is renewed scrutiny of LeMieux's dealings and those of his law firm, Gunster Yoakley & Stewart:

- The law firm, chaired by LeMieux, helped foreign workers get visas last fall to help build a high-rise hotel and condos in Miami, depriving dozens of Florida workers of jobs at a time of rising unemployment. CBS4 News in Miami first reported the law firm's efforts, which included persuading the U.S. State Department that the Mexican workers had special skills that Americans didn't. In a statement, the firm said LeMieux had no involvement in any immigration matters.
- While serving as Crist's chief of staff in 2007, LeMieux helped secretly negotiate a lucrative gambling agreement with the Seminole Tribe of Florida that was struck down by the Florida Supreme Court as unconstitutional, and has triggered a debate over the expansion of gambling in Florida. LeMieux recently helped negotiate a second compact that the Legislature will consider this fall. He has said the compact will contribute more money to Florida schools and will limit future expansion of gambling.
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Times/Herald staff writer Shannon Colavecchio contributed to this report. Steve Bousquet can be reached at

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Sen. LeMieux face scrutiny on his way to Washington

