

Spring backward

April, as T.S. Eliot reminded us, is the cruelest month, and this year it was especially cruel to incumbent politicians (although one suspects November will be even crueler). It was also hard on the nation's wallet. For only the third time in the last 30 years, the federal government ran a deficit in the month when Americans file their tax returns, bleeding \$82.7 billion in red ink. The national debt passed \$13 trillion, and Europe's debt crisis gave us a glimpse of what bloated pensions and unsustainable entitlements will do to our fiscal future.

As the season stirred the dormant roots with spring rain, a massive plume of oil – an image fraught with symbolism – spread into the Gulf of Mexico, a disaster rivaled only by the blowout of the Milwaukee Brewers bullpen

Peasants light torches, grab pitchforks
Polls across the nation and in Wisconsin continue to show a bleak environment for the ruling political class. In March, a poll by our publisher, the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, found that only 34% of likely voters thought the state was headed in the right direction.

Fewer than four in 10 (39%) regarded elected officials as "trustworthy." Less than a quarter (23%) thought that elected leaders were "capable of solving the state budget deficit." And fewer than four in 10 (38%) thought that the phrase "cares about people like me" describes elected leaders pretty well or very well.

Perhaps hearing the winged chariot of voter anger at their heels, two dozen state legislators announced their retirements. So did Congressman David Obey, who seemed unenthused about explaining to voters how he had spent so much of their children's money. The ancient porkmeister chose to ride off into the rosy sunset of a government pension, where he and Jim Doyle undoubtedly will sit back and bemoan the ingratitude of Badger State peasants.

Perhaps the felons will get train passes
Faced with the dire poll numbers, the state's politicians decided to redouble their efforts to...do more of the same. Doyle continues to push an \$800

million half-fast train from Milwaukee to someplace in Madison, and pols in southeastern Wisconsin try to fast-track a \$300 million commuter line from Kenosha to Milwaukee, and a \$100 million downtown Milwaukee streetcar that pretty much goes nowhere.

Meanwhile, Doyle's chief jail keeper is speeding up plans to turn more felons loose on the streets. Department of Corrections Secretary Rick Raemisch announced that he wants to shift the governor's early-felon-release program into overdrive before voters and Republicans have a chance to stop it.

Raemisch hopes to see "50 to 60 inmates a month" sprung from the prisons before the doors clang shut again.

"I want a program so successful and so powerful that no one would dare eliminate it," Raemisch declared. "That's why I feel like the demons are chasing me right now."

Whether he's actually chased by demons depends, of course, on which neighborhood Raemisch frequents after his plan takes effect.

No, they didn't learn anything
Even as the economy unravels from the subprime lending and housing meltdowns, the taxpayer-funded Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority is running radio ads touting no-money-down mortgages. (WARNING: this is not a spoof.)

"WHEDA...We do...So you can buy your first house with no money down! Coming up with a down payment prevents a lot of renters from becoming homeowners...."

But what if you also have no income? Not to worry. There's a bailout for that too. WHEDA promises that the taxpayers will even pay your mortgage for six months if you lose your job.

Now that's sweet, but isn't it how we got into this mess in the first place?

Madison unveils free-housing program
Perhaps inspired by WHEDA, housing activists in Madison developed their own no-down-payment housing program in May. They broke into and

occupied vacant houses, while police stood by. Declaring "Housing is a human right!" and "People over profits!" the squatters made a show of taking possession while television cameras rolled.

Reported blogger David Blaska: "The neighborhood association president...informed the news media that she did not have the answer but maybe this was it. Which goes some way towards explaining why her neighborhood is as troubled as it is. Yes, send more non-workers into the neighborhood! Let them live free without paying rent. Whoever has the muscle can break into the nicest places. Yeah, maybe that will improve things!"

Wards of the state

Spring also saw another milestone in American life: USA Today reported that "paychecks from private business shrank to their smallest share in U.S. history," while dependence on government hit a historic high. The Tax Foundation says that nearly half of U.S. households now pay no federal income tax at all.

All of this led Rep. Paul Ryan (dashingy featured on our cover) to wonder aloud whether we had reached a tipping point. Citing numbers from the Tax Foundation, Ryan said, "in 2004, 20% of U.S. households were getting about 75% of their income from the federal government. In other words, one out of five families in America is already government dependent. Another 20% were receiving almost 40% of their income from federal programs, so another one in five has become government reliant for their livelihood."

That means that three out of five households in America, Ryan pointed out, "were receiving more government benefits and services [in dollar value] than they were paying back in taxes."

Under the new Obama budget, said Ryan, this "net government inflow" will rise to 70% of households. "Look at it this way: Three out of 10 American families are supporting themselves plus — through government — supplying or supplementing the incomes of seven other households. As a permanent arrangement, this is individually unfair, politically inequitable, and economically dangerous."

Papers, please

Liberal politicians, civil libertarians, and immigration activists bitterly denounced Arizona's new law that gave police the power to ask for proof of citizenship if they had a "reasonable suspicion" that someone they had stopped or arrested was in the country illegally.

Police in Wisconsin have no such power, but under a new law passed by the Democratic legislature and signed into law by Gov. Doyle, police can now demand proof of auto insurance. Failure to show your papers can result in fines. Activists have yet to object.

Tom Barrett, prophet

As the road construction season approached, state officials announced that the bridges on the Zoo Interchange in Milwaukee were falling down, causing a brief shutdown of the state's most heavily traveled exchange.

This was especially embarrassing for train enthusiast, Milwaukee mayor, and gubernatorial candidate Tom Barrett, who had gone on record pooh-pooing any need to maintain the freeway artery.

In a June 2005 letter to legislative leaders, Barrett had opposed spending money on even preliminary engineering for the interchange, calling it "foolish" and a "waste" of money. "Unlike the Marquette Interchange," Barrett confidently predicted, "the Zoo Interchange will stand long enough for us to resolve the issues."

Awkward....

It's hard being green

In late May, California's nonpartisan auditing agency reported that the state's pioneering cap-and-trade legislation likely "adversely affected" the state's economy, noting that the green bill would raise the cost of energy, "causing the prices of goods and services to rise; lowering business profits; and reducing production, income and jobs."

Wisconsin, of course, came within hours of passing similar legislation before the Legislature abruptly adjourned. In other news, Al and Tipper broke up.

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