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OUR VIEW: Playing politics at the Capitol

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It should surprise no one that DFL senators have requested an ethics investigation of Sen. Scott Newman, R-Hutchinson, on the grounds that he violated the public trust and brought dishonor to the Senate.

What isn't so clear is whether such an investigation is worth the time, effort and potential distraction it could create for a Legislature that has enough on its plate simply trying to figure out how to dig its way out of a \$6.2 billion budget hole.

That's not to say we think Newman should receive a free pass. While some seem ready to accept the former administrative law judge's explanation of miscommunication with his legislative assistant, we think he owes his constituents more.

After the Minnesota Nurses Association requested a meeting with the freshman senator, his office sent an e-mail saying he "will not see any organizations that donated to/supported his opponent Hal Kimball."

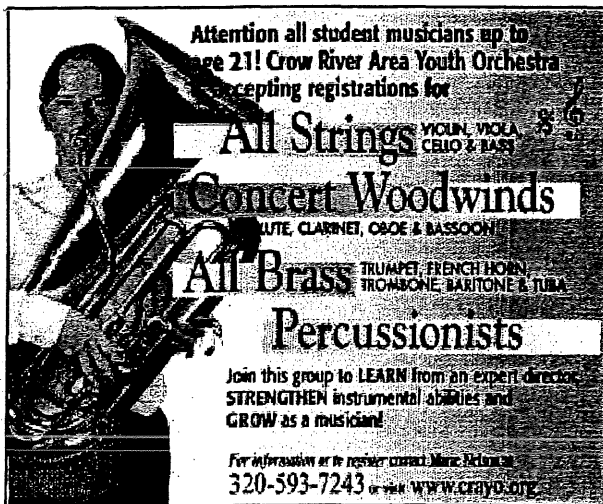
This line alone could be explained away as a misunderstanding between Newman and his assistant. But the e-mail goes on to say that, "After some careful checking, I discovered that the MNA had donated to Kimball's campaign."

That's the line that should trouble residents of Senate District 18 and Newman's peers in the Senate, because it indicates something more was going on. We would prefer to believe Newman isn't keeping an "enemies" list, but the fact that his legislative assistant did some "careful checking" and found the MNA had donated to Kimball's campaign alludes to something more than a miscommunication. Either the assistant was told by Newman to check, or she did that investigation on her own.

Neither answer reflects well on Newman. Still, his constituents should hear something more by way of explanation than the "I should be giving clearer instructions" line Newman offered last week. He was elected to represent all of District 18, not just those who voted for him.

The senator and his Republican colleagues would like the whole matter to just go away. Republican Party Chairman Tony Sutton called the DFL senators' request for an ethics investigation frivolous and "politically motivated."

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We would agree it could be politically motivated. But frivolous? The suggestion that a senator and/or his office staff keeps a list of those who don't support him as a way to determine who he will and will not meet with should concern everyone.

It is a misperception — we hope — that Newman should want to clear up as quickly as he possibly can, and in greater detail than simply indicating he “should be giving clearer instructions” to his staff.

Devoting time to an ethics investigation and possible hearings probably would be a waste of time, as the Republican majority seems unlikely to censure one of its own over this issue.

However, Newman needs to make a better accounting of himself and assure his constituents that something like this will not happen again.

Until he does, Newman leaves the door open to skepticism about his ability to represent all people in his district and willingness to work with those who have opposing views.

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