

## TAR HEEL VOICES

*Judicial overhaul moving too fast***Tom Campbell**

Our legislators are due to return to Raleigh on January 10th, another continuation of the 2017 session they just can't seem to conclude. The January date was set to spend a day or so passing judicial reforms, a prospect that doesn't seem likely.

As the legislative session was coming to a close in July, Representative Justin Burr proposed a judicial redistricting bill to redraw the districts for superior and district court judgeships, as well as those for District Attorneys. The 11th hour proposal drew immediate opposition, as much because it was thrown into the hopper at the last minute as because of opposition to the proposal itself. No system-wide redistricting had occurred since the 1955 creation of our state's court system and during that time we have gained millions of residents and population centers have shifted, accompanied by major shifts in judicial workloads.

After more deliberation opposition shifted away from the concept of redrawing judicial maps to who would

redraw them and how it would be accomplished. Bluntly stated, too few had confidence in turning over the process to the same group who re-drew Congressional and legislative districts in 2011 and, rather than attempting to allay concerns by establishing a fair and deliberative process that allowed sufficient input, legislative leadership seemed intent to make it happen quickly. Public doubts were confirmed when proposed new maps revealed that 12 district court districts would double-bunk judges — pitting incumbents against each other — and that 53 percent of those were African Americans. The proposed maps also contained 10 districts where superior court judges were double-bunked, 28 percent of them African Americans.

To make the optics of this redistricting worse, lawmakers, wanting to put the new maps in effect for the 2018 election cycle, recognized there wasn't sufficient time to both pass the new districts and hold judicial primaries in the normal time frame, so instead of waiting to establish the new districts another year, decided to eliminate judicial primaries in 2018, triggering lawsuits.

Isn't this another replay of the redistricting movie we've already watched? But wait. It gets even more curious. The Nightmare on Jones Street

producers weren't content with the level of angst already generated and decided to create almost total maelstrom.

The 2017 legislative session had already passed laws requiring that all judicial candidates list their political party affiliation on the election ballot. Voters freely admit they don't know much about those who run for the bench and evidently lawmakers didn't think the voters were selecting enough Republican judges, so now we will politicize judicial elections. Add to this mix a proposal to limit judicial terms to two years instead of the eight-years currently called for in our Constitution for appellate and superior court judges and four-year terms for district court judges. And while we're throwing the judicial system into turmoil let's raise again the suggestion to take away the popular election of judges and develop some undefined process for judicial selection.

I'm neither a lawyer, judge nor lawmaker, but I think I have enough common sense to rule that this whole concept of judicial reform needs to be tabled until such time as reasoned, fair-minded and adequate debate can come up with something better than what we've seen and heard so far.

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