

Democrats should make Scott Bates talk

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By David Collins Day staff writer

I still have faith in the Connecticut Democrats who represent the state in Washington, part of the bulwark against a Trump presidency that grows increasingly alarming by the day.

But I am losing my confidence in the Connecticut Democrats who have a chokehold on state government, as they busily sweep the corruption at the Connecticut Port Authority under the rug.

Port authority critic Keven Blacker had it right last week when he predicted the Transportation Committee controlled by Democrats was planning a "choreographed political farce" with [its hearing](#) on the port authority.

Blacker didn't know, though, that the choreography included the Connecticut State Police commissioner, who, brought in by the governor's office, sent two plainclothes officers to intercept the authority critic right before the start of the hearing, [questioning him](#) in a room guarded by a uniformed officer. The police commissioner later admitted that there was nothing threatening in the Blacker email that was given as the pretext for the pre-hearing intervention.

I can't find the words to describe the Democrats I have heard defending this tactic against a political critic. But I would use the same words, if I could find them, for those I have heard suggest that the corruption at the port authority exposed so far involves small amounts of money and is only petty corruption, like that's OK, or that there isn't more.

Republicans launched a news conference attack on Democrats before the start of the Tuesday hearing, complaining that their requests to have the people responsible for running the scandal-ridden authority — chief among them former Chairman Scott Bates, a prominent state Democrat — be made to appear, by subpoena if necessary. This would seem obvious.

The committee chairmen, Democrats, responded by saying they might do that someday, that someday being, it seemed to me, when the Arctic ice stops melting.

While Blacker was being questioned by police Tuesday, many lobbyists found the best seats in the hearing room. Like the governor, none probably want a little scandal to stand in the way of the projected wind windfall.

Bates, the deputy secretary of the state who normally loves television cameras, has dropped out of sight as the scandals have unfolded. His boss, Secretary of the State Denise Merrill, another of the state's most prominent Democrats, keeps complimenting her deputy at each new revelation of chaos and corruption at his port authority.

Doesn't Bates want to clear his name and explain what went on at the agency he ran? I don't think there is a television station in the state that wouldn't give him a lot of air time to answer questions.

One of the bigger sweepers under the rug at Tuesday's hearing was Sen. Norm Needleman of Essex, who has called Bates a personal friend.

After shocking testimony from auditors that the port authority wasn't even keeping records of its bank accounts — kids I know who run lemonade stands keep track of every nickel — Needleman whined that, after all, businesses that have budgets of only \$1 million don't usually face comprehensive audits like the

one done on the port authority. So they made some mistakes, he suggested, but it was a little agency without much staffing.

Sorry, senator, but when you have hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars sloshing around without any accountability, you have big problems.

The person evidently assigned by Gov. Ned Lamont to steer clear of the scandals and keep negotiating a wind deal is David Kooris, the deputy commissioner of the state Department of Economic and Community Development, now authority interim chairman, who did a lot of his own sweeping Tuesday.

Kooris seems like a stand-up guy who has the unenviable task, by the governor's orders, of steering the foundering port authority to a big new deal. He would have been useful on the Titanic, exclaiming pay no attention to that iceberg.

The full-speed-ahead agenda for the crippled port authority also was promoted in an [op-ed this week](#) by Shawn T. Wooden, the Democratic state treasurer, who incredibly suggested: "We have to repair the ship while continuing to sail it." How ridiculous is that?

When Senate Republican Leader Len Fasano called for Attorney General William Tong, a Democrat, to [investigate all the contracts](#) entered into by the port authority, including giving control of the New London port to the competing port operator in New Haven, Tong said, more or less, that he'd think about it.

I took some solace from two local Democrats on the Transportation Committee, Sen. Cathy Osten of Sprague and Rep. Christine Conley of Groton, who both expressed concern about plans to close the New London port to traditional cargo. They also seemed suitably dismayed by the auditors' sobering report.

Alas, the party steamroller is flattening them, too.

The timetable laid out by Kooris on Tuesday — the new audits of the port authority done by late October, the wind deal unveiled in September — would suggest they want to wrap this up before we know how deep the corruption at the agency that laid the foundation might go.

A few timely subpoenas or a quick review by the well-staffed attorney general's office could change that timetable, but that might rattle someone with close ties to a lot of prominent Democrats. It wouldn't make the lobbyists in suits happy, either.

Apparently, it is not going to happen.

This is the opinion of David Collins.

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