



Ramsey idea may be what we need

The first Republican lieutenant governor since Reconstruction wants more conservative judges in the pipeline for seats in Tennessee, and Senate Speaker Ron Ramsey is willing to play some parliamentary games to get his way.

Ramsey is threatening to allow the Judicial Selection Commission to pass off into the sunset without its charter being renewed by the state Legislature if restrictions on judicial nominees are not lifted.

Ramsey is on to something, but it is not getting more conservative judges on the bench. Instead, he has stumbled upon yet another bit of bad public policy involving the way Tennessee fills open judicial seats in our highest courts.

Ramsey is adamant that as Senate Speaker he should be able to appoint his own choices to the Judicial Selection Commission — the body of legal experts and lawyers that pass along recommendations for judges to the governor for approval. Under the current system, the speakers of both chambers in the Legislature and the governor appoint members of the commission. Their list of choices, though, comes in most cases from pre-approved lists generated by special interest groups within the legal community, including the state's trial lawyers and governmental associations like district attorneys.

This comes on the heels of House Democrats killing a bill from their own governor in subcommittee that would have opened the Judicial Selection Commission's interviews with candidates to the public.

Put simply, it is unclear why constituencies only within the legal community should have the sole opportunity to get their people on a commission to appoint judges. Judges serve all citizens, not just the lawyers that come before them in court. At a maximum, the appointing officeholders — both speakers and the governor — should have minimum education and professional experience standards under the law for who they can appoint. Then, certainly, those backed with the recommendation from any group in the state — lawyers or not — could apply for an appointment.

This is the third serious complaint about the way the Judicial Selection Commission works in the last year, including Gov. Phil Bredesen's contention not enough minority choices are sent his

way by the committee. Between that and the open government issue House Democrats killed, Ramsey might be doing the people of Tennessee a favor to allow this commission to sunset and effectively blow it up so that new enabling legislation can be passed for a commission with more open, inclusive practices.