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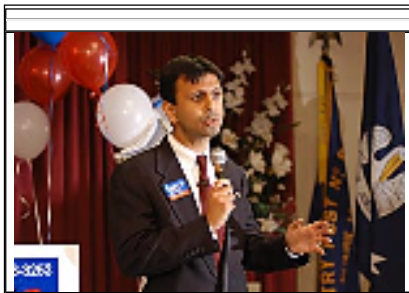
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Transparent as Mud

If Gov. Bobby Jindal truly wants state government to be open and honest, maybe he should start with his own office.

By [Jeremy Alford](#)

With each passing day of his new administration, it appears more likely that Gov. Bobby Jindal has an evil twin. The Jindal we see today seems to lack the courage of his campaign convictions " those promises of open government and transparency that he made last year while touring the state and wooing voters. Sure, he's pushing an ethics agenda right now, but trying to get full and complete answers out of the Jindal Administration is proving more difficult these days than springing Edwin Edwards from the federal pokey.



For instance, when he was campaigning on a 'Fresh Start for Louisiana' last year, how do you think Jindal would have answered the following question?

*Should the son of an executive who holds tens of millions of dollars in contracts with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers be appointed to a position that oversees coastal affairs?*

Based on all of his pre-election rhetoric, Jindal likely would have promised that his administration would do everything it could to avoid even the appearance of impropriety or conflict of interest.

Ask his administration that question today and you're likely to hear crickets chirping.

*Gambit Weekly* contacted Jindal's press secretary, Melissa Sellers, last week to inquire about a very real potential conflict, not a hypothetical one. The father of Garret Graves, Jindal's senior coastal advisor, is the owner of an engineering firm that is among the top contract holders in Louisiana with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Because Graves' new position also makes him chairman of the state Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, whose primary partner is the Corps, we asked Sellers if there was a potential conflict of interest and if Jindal was aware of the connection.

Graves was appointed on Jan. 3, according to a press release, and was interviewed by Jindal's team the month before. Yet, somehow Jindal knew nothing of the potential conflict until last week when *Gambit Weekly* made its inquiry, Sellers says. Furthermore, in a written response, Sellers argues that Graves also knew nothing of his own father's work and public contracts until recently. Somehow, everyone involved missed the fact that the firm made \$47 million last year from Corps contracts alone " and the fact that the firm also does contract work for the state.

Garret Graves' father, John Graves, president of Evans-Graves Engineers, says everyone should have been aware of the connection by last week. "I know it had been put to the staff more than a month ago. I said from the beginning there was a potential conflict of interest and apparently that fell on deaf ears," he told us.

Does that mean the information didn't reach Jindal until last week? Was it withheld from him? If so, who initially interviewed Garret Graves? When asked directly who interviewed him, Garret Graves declined to answer. So did Sellers, who is supposed to provide the media with information on behalf of the governor. In fact, Sellers was repeatedly asked for the name or names of the individuals who interviewed Graves, but she staunchly refused and repeated the same answer each time: "A few folks on the transition team."

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That response was about as far from Jindal's promised 'transparency' as you can get. Why can't the names of the interviewers be released? It appears nothing illegal has transpired, and safeguards have been put in place. The younger Graves is well qualified to hold the position, and the firm of Evans-Graves Engineers, which was well established before the son was even born, has agreed to stop pursuing projects that might present a conflict of interest. In the end, it's possible that the entire situation amounts to nothing more than a communications breakdown inside the governor's office, but the fact that information is being withheld makes it look like something much worse.

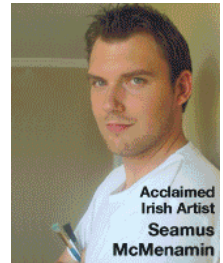
No matter where the chain of responsibility ends, Jindal needs to come up with some answers. The bullish tactics that insulate him from the press and the public have quickly become a hallmark of his nascent administration, and at some point he may find himself not just insulated but also isolated. Another example of his administration's official stonewalling came to light last week when *The Advocate* in Baton Rouge tried to take a closer look at the salaries several administration members are making. According to the *Advocate* story, 'Jindal's chief of staff, Timmy Teepell, did not return two requests for comment on the governor's payroll.'

As the new governor prepared to roll out his plan for a special session on ethics reform, *Gambit Weekly* also asked Jindal about state Rep. Gordon Dove, a Houma Republican who was blessed by Jindal as the new chair of the House Natural Resources Committee. Industry representatives have complained in writing that Dove faces a potential conflict of interest: He admits to owning roughly 1.4 percent of an oil well located north of Baton Rouge. The well provides him with roughly \$900 a month in royalties.

Dove says he told House Speaker Jim Tucker of Algiers, a fellow Republican, about his financial interests before being appointed as committee chair. When we asked Sellers if the administration was made aware of this " and for a comment from Jindal on the potential conflict " only one sentence was offered in return. "The governor was not aware of that conversation," Sellers said, referring to the exchange between Dove and Tucker, who also could not be reached for comment. If Jindal has a problem with a lawmaker on his team overseeing a department that regulates an industry in which the lawmaker has a financial interest, he certainly didn't feel like talking about it last week.

Jindal's promises of 'transparency' and a 'gold standard' for ethics reform notwithstanding, The New Boss looks a lot like The Old Boss. Then again, maybe Jindal just needs some time to warm to his new responsibilities. In the coming weeks, as his ethics agenda winds its way through the Legislature, perhaps voters will catch a glimpse of the Bobby Jindal they worshiped and adored during the 2007 campaign.

For now, though, questions such as 'Who interviewed Garret Graves?' will remain unanswered " and will serve as a stark reminder of just how far this administration needs to go to keep the governor's promise of transparency. Jeremy Alford can be reached at [jeremy@jeremyalford.com](mailto:jeremy@jeremyalford.com).



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