

Editorials

Political retribution

The First Amendment matters

We told you a few weeks ago about Londonderry Times publisher Deb Paul. She spent the day before Thanksgiving standing trial over political ads purchased in her newspaper. She will now spend a day the week before Christmas finding out her sentence for failing to use what reporter Damien Fisher, writing for InDepthNH, termed “the magic words.”

The New Hampshire campaign finance law specifies a number of requirements for political advertising. It does not say who is responsible for a failure to meet those requirements. Attorney General John Formella’s office insisted that Deb Paul was responsible and not the campaigns or candidates. Judge Kerry Steckowych, presented with a one plus one equals two case, decided that yes, the ads in question did not contain the “magic words.” Somehow, even without the magic words labeling the ads in question as “paid political advertisement,” witnesses in the case easily identified them as the political ads they obviously were.

This all might leave some wondering what all the fuss was about. Who was harmed? The answer to that is far more complicated than some campaign ads in a very small town newspaper. Understanding what is going on means understanding that Deb Paul is a gadfly. She has opinions and has made them known in the pages of her newspaper and from her former seat on the Londonderry town council.

Deb’s opinions have ruffled quite a few feathers, and that has resulted in political retribution. Traditional politics were not enough to shut up Deb Paul. It seems clear that some of the ad complaints submitted to the Attorney General’s Office came from political enemies.

Like getting Al Capone on tax evasion charges, they couldn’t shut Deb up with regular politics, so they set the law on her. But Deb Paul is not a gangster. She is an American using her First Amendment rights to free speech and a free press. John Formella should be ashamed that his office was allowed to be exploited by those wanting to shut down someone’s First Amendment rights.

We hope Judge Steckowych will recognize that while there was a technical violation in this case, the punishment of being put on trial and financing an expensive defense has ensured that Deb Paul won’t soon repeat the mistake.

We also hope the Legislature will take a good look at legislation being put forward by Rep. Kristine Perez to ensure that no other publisher will be put in fear of arrest and imprisonment for failing to use magic words while working to keep New Hampshire informed.

Finally, we hope that Governor Chris Sununu will consider a pardon to right this miscarriage of justice. However you feel about Deb Paul, or her opinions, we should all be concerned when the right to express those opinions is threatened.