

Kate Brown muzzles energy bill critics. So much for those inaugural promises: Editorial



Chief Justice Thomas Balmer administers the oath of office to Secretary of State Kate Brown in the House chamber of the Oregon Capitol on Feb. 18, 2015. Brown becomes the state's 38th governor, succeeding John Kitzhaber, who resigned amid an ethics scandal. Bruce Ely/Staff
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Was it only one year ago that [Kate Brown, Oregon's newly sworn-in governor](#), boasted that she had "sought to promote transparency and trust in government" during her lengthy public career? And was it only a year ago that she vowed that "As governor, this will not change"?

Promises, promises.

These days, a [complex and potentially expensive "clean energy" proposal](#) with little, if any, environmental benefit is being muscled through a short legislative session. Where is the governor who promised so recently to promote transparency and earn the public's trust? Muzzling dissent, that's where.

[House Bill 4036](#) would require the state's two investor-owned utilities to stop selling Oregonians electricity derived from coal by 2030. By 2040, meanwhile, half of the electricity provided by these utilities in Oregon would have to come from renewables. [This proposal was negotiated outside of public view by utilities, environmental groups and renewable-energy boosters.](#) Environmental groups have promised to place a similar proposal before voters in November if lawmakers fail to approve HB4036 during this year's abbreviated session.

From the Desk of
Senator Ted Ferrioli

So the commission decided to do its own analysis, and its staff prepared a document that included problems with the no-coal bill and potential fixes. The document was ready for release on the day in early January when the utilities and environmental groups issued a press release trumpeting their proposal.

Did the governor's office welcome the commission's attempt to keep the public informed? Nope again. Ackerman sent the talking points to the governor's office and received the following note from Sadhir in return: "Please hold off providing comment until we discuss further here."

Commissioner Stephen Bloom later likened the experience to "getting steam rolled." Fellow Commissioner Savage told a former commissioner that "it looks like we're going to be silenced on the whole thing."

The commission finally held a public meeting on Jan. 29 – just days before the start of the session – to question the utilities about the proposal.

The gubernatorial fingerprints on this process are not those of someone who seeks to promote transparency and trust in government. They are the fingerprints of someone who sought, instead, to control the flow of pertinent information to the public at a time when such information might have presented problems for the backers of legislation that could drive up power costs without accomplishing anything meaningful for the environment. It's almost as if the governor's office intended to muzzle the PUC until HB4036 gathered a head of steam.

The bill is now in the Senate, having cleared the House Feb. 15. The 39 representatives – Republicans and Democrats alike – who voted credulously for HB4036 deserve tough questions from their constituents. No one, however, has done more during this episode to erode public trust in government than the governor, whose office's machinations call to mind an observation once made by Nkenge Harmon Johnson, former Gov. John Kitzhaber's onetime communications director.

"I was told," Harmon Johnson wrote in [a November 2014 guest column](#) about her time on Kitzhaber's staff, "that as long as things were good it did not matter whether things were right."