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Florida's "fixed it" farce

By Bev Conover

May 11, 2001—Okay, Floridians, you can go back to sleep now, because your wonderful legislature has "fixed" the elections mess by mandating every election precinct have optical scanner voting systems in place by 2002.

It's "fixed" all right, but not in the way you think. Punch cards and chad may be out. Ditto for the mechanical lever machines whose gears can be shaved to produce a desired result. But optical scanners without controls to assure an accurate count are no panacea.

The legislature did nothing to reform the election laws to make it unmistakably clear to even an idiot when and how manual recounts are to be done, much less require two sets of test ballots—marked and tallied by an independent panel in each precinct—be run through the scanners before the voting begins and then before the tabulation begins to make sure the scanners are correctly counting the votes. The legislature did nothing to reinforce its clear standard about who may apply for an absentee ballot. Its only other major "fix" was requiring the creation of a statewide voter registration list to ostensibly prevent duplicate voting.

Gee, Secretary of State Katherine Harris, whose state term is up in 2003 and the office vanishes, announced Wednesday that she will run for Congress in 2004. In the meantime, she will have carte blanche to purge the voter rolls without a drop of input or dissent from any honest county supervisor of elections. That's one way to guarantee yourself a seat in Congress, in case your heavily Republican district should suddenly turn on you.

Speaking of Harris, there she was alongside a gleeful Governor Jeb Bush Wednesday in West Palm Beach for the ceremonial signing of the elections bill. Also part of the photo op were Lt. Governor Frank Brogan and Palm Beach County Supervisor of Elections Theresa LaPore, who the day before withdrew from the Democratic Party and re-registered as an independent.

Both women are interesting studies. While throughout the madness following the Nov. 7 election, LaPore was repeatedly portrayed—mainly by Republicans who wanted to stop the manual recount—as a loyal, true-blue Democrat, Jake Tapper in his book, "Down & Dirty: The Plot to Steal the Presidency," noted that LaPore originally was a registered Republican, then in 1979 re-registered as an independent. "When a third party formally registered as 'Independent,' she changed her registration to 'no party,'" Tapper said.

When then county Supervisor of Elections Jackie Winchester told LaPore in the fall of 1995 that she was retiring, LaPore "registered as a Democrat and ran" for the office, according to Tapper.

So much for a being a loyal anything. But LaPore would have us feel sorry for her, because she turned to voting systems manager Tony Enos for help with the ballot design (Tapper offers no clues about where Enos was coming from, other than he was 36 years old and had worked in the supervisor's office since was was 18). And so it came to pass that LaPore and other Democrats with no knowledge of the state's election laws approved the infamous "butterfly" ballot.

The question remains: Was LaPore just stupid or corrupt? The evidence in Tapper's book suggests the former, because, he claims Judge Charles Burton, the chairman of the county canvassing board, and the other canvassing board members knew diddly about the law and let themselves be snookered into obtaining a written opinion on when manual recounts could be done from Harris lackey Clay Roberts, the head of the state Division of Elections, unaware that any written opinion from either Roberts or his boss,

Harris, was binding. Tapper even goes so far as to write that Burton may not have even known the Division of Elections was part of Harris' office.

One thing that can be said for Harris is that she is not stupid. We shall leave it to you to deduce what she is.

Before she took up her task as state chairman of then Texas Governor George W. Bush's presidential campaign, in hopes of landing an ambassadorship to somewhere or other, Harris was a manipulator extraordinaire.

Harris has the dubious distinction of having run the most expensive campaign in Florida's history for a state senate seat, having raised more than a half million dollars—\$20,600 of which illegally came from Riscorp Insurance Company. She later returned the Riscorp money, but that was after she defeated freshman Democratic state Senator Jim Boczar in 1994 and, as a member of the state Senate Banking and Insurance Committee in 1996, sponsored a bill to make it more difficult for out-of-state insurance companies to compete with Riscorp for workers' compensation policies.

Said Tapper, "For a newcomer, Harris took to the sleazy ways of Tallahassee politics damn quick."

Harris announced in 1998 that she would be a GOP candidate for the office of secretary of state, because then Secretary of State Sandra Mortham was slated to be Jeb Bush's running mate in his second bid for the governorship.

Then when it came to light that Secretary of State Sandra Mortham had also received illegal contributions from Riscorp—a paltry \$5,825 in comparison to Harris' \$20,600—in addition to questions being raised over her expenditures of state money on outings that had nothing to do with state business, Jeb dropped the idea of putting her on his ticket. And thusly, it came to pass that Mortham and Harris went head-to-head in a primary battle to become the GOP's candidate for secretary of state.

While five of Riscorp's executive pleaded guilty to felony and misdemeanor charges over the illegal 1994 campaign contributions, and the company's founder was sentenced to five years in prison, Harris had the audacity to run TV commercials attacking Mortham for accepting Riscorp money.

Harris went on to beat Mortham, who ironically strongly supported election reform, and her Democratic opponent. This was the same year a constitutional amendment calling for the abolition of the office with the end of Harris' term was passed.

Election reform was the furthest thing from the new secretary of state's mind, with the exception of hiring ChoicePoint to purge the voter rolls of "felons." Harris busied herself spending state money on trips to various parts of the world to allegedly promote trade with Florida. Harris has spent more money and time traveling than the governor.

Pointing out her meteoric rise, Tapper wrote, "Just six years! Most politicians take at least a decade to completely sell out the very cause [the Ringling Museum of Art, in Harris' case] that compelled them to run for office in the first place. But Harris is on a fast track. She wanted to run for [U.S.] senate this year, in fact, but Jeb had already decided that Rep. Bill McCollum would get the nomination, and he cleared the field accordingly and told Harris so."

But none of this came up during Jeb Bush's ceremonial love fest signing, which he hopes will lay to rest the late night comedians' jokes about Florida. "It's a day to celebrate," Bush said, contending that the move to statewide use of optical scanners is "a system that will be the envy of the nation."

It will?

Nor was there a mention that in certain precincts in Escambia County, which have the wonderful optical scanners, election workers turned off the feature that spits back improperly marked ballots to the voters.

Why? Because they are paying an outrageous 23 cents for each ballot or so they claim. So somebody goofed up a ballot. Tough. It's money first or is it?

Then Bush dropped an even more chilling remark, when he said Palm Beach County "is one of the counties that is likely to upgrade to a high-tech, state-of-the-art touch screen voting system, bypassing the lower-cost optical scan system that will be required as a minimum statewide standard," the St. Petersburg Times reported.

Touch screen voting, the perfect system for stealing elections and no way to prove the thefts.

As we said at the outset, you can go back to sleep, Floridians. The voting system is all fixed now. Of course, if you believe that, we have some waterfront property in the Sahara we would like to sell you.

But before the rest of you get smug grins on your faces, what happened last November and in who knows how many primary and general elections before that, goes way beyond Florida. With each passing day more and more Election 2000 horrors come to light in states across the country.

In fact, rather than castigate Floridians for what went on in the Sunshine State, maybe we should thank them for finally bringing attention to the many ways we are being deprived of our votes that are so precious to a democratic society. If it had been business as usual, without all the other bumbblings and machinations, the Bushies would have gotten away clean with stealing the election for George W. Sadly, you aren't likely to see the perpetrators of the crimes brought up on charges, much less marched off to prison.

Perhaps the manner and method by which we cast and count our votes is not an exciting subject, but it is crucial if we are truly to have government of, by and for the people. But where is the debate? Where is the outcry? Where are the people storming their state capitals to demand voting systems that are difficult to rig and that leave paper trails so results can be verified? Instead, we meekly go along with replacing one system controlled by third parties with another controlled by third parties.

When is it going to sink in that if we don't stop the theft of our votes and the disenfranchisement of voters, that it won't matter whom we vote for in 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, because the powers that be will have predetermined the outcome? This is not a Republican or a Democrat or a Green or any other party thing. It is theft pure and simple, and it is systematic and has been going on for a long time—whether it's engaged in at the local, county or state levels or by greasing the palms of the faceless people who control the computer codes or diddle with the old mechanical machines.

Alas, the more things change, the more they stay the same.