

Balance court with justice from Central Washington

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Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board

Jim Johnson is considered the state Supreme Court's most conservative member, and he undeniably stands apart from his judicial coterie. But his dissents aren't rooted simply in ideology but also in his life experience, and the court would benefit from a replacement who shares much of what he has brought to the court — and a viewpoint shared by many residents of Central Washington.

Earlier this year, Johnson alone voted against ordering the Legislature to write a report by April 30 on its progress toward meeting the court's McCleary ruling, which mandates better state support of K-12 education. Johnson dissented over concerns that the court was overstepping its jurisdiction by essentially telling the Legislature how to do its job. That dissent fits his view about maintaining separation of powers in our state's government.

Before being elected to the court, Johnson worked as a private attorney who advocated ballot measures that limited state spending and tax increases. He also worked with the Washington State Grange on Initiative 872, which voters approved in 2004, to institute the "Top Two" primary — over the objection of the state's major political parties.

Johnson's wariness about the powers of government also spilled over into rulings that favored transparency and public access to government records. Johnson provided the lone dissent last year in an 8-1 vote that the state's governor may claim executive privilege in keeping certain documents private. His strong stand in favor of government openness played a key role in his winning the Yakima Herald-Republic's editorial board's endorsement in 2010.

Johnson, though a Seattle native who worked in the Puget Sound area, understands how people think and work in Washington's small towns and rural areas. He comprehends how people value private property rights — especially how government sometimes doesn't — and his being an Army veteran sets him apart from other members of the court.

Health reasons are prompting Johnson to leave more than two years before his term expires, so Gov. Jay Inslee will appoint a successor. Inslee is no stranger to small towns and rural areas, having represented Central Washington in the Legislature and Congress in the 1980s and 1990s, and we hope Inslee keeps that experience in mind when he appoints a successor.

First off, only one of the nine justices hails from east of the Cascades, that being Debra Stephens of Spokane, leaving Central Washington unrepresented on the court. We think a Central Washington appointee who understands this region's history, economy, issues and values would bring a valuable viewpoint to the court's current westside makeup. We especially want to see someone who appreciate the value — and citizen support — of this state's open-government laws.

This issue isn't so much about ideology as it is about a successor's awareness and experience. Ours is a diverse state, and a voice for a large segment of the state will leave the court at the end of the month. We hope that through Johnson's successor, a similar voice will continue to echo through Washington's Temple of Justice — and all the better if it is a voice from Central Washington.

• Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Sharon J. Prill, Bob Crider, Frank Purdy and Karen Troianello.

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Nick Hughes · Top Commenter · Central Washington University

I seriously doubt that INslee, who dumped Central Washington decades ago to favor the west side, could care less about us here. This is his chance to more completely stack the deck with liberal judges who will now likely vote unanimously for their issues.

One thing Johnson did, I don't think I like. The "top two" primary was an infinitely better result than that folly of forcing us to vote a party ticket, and then restricted to one of the two major parties. But it still is a restriction on voters' rights and choices because other parties didn't have a chance to emerge. Of course, I may rue my opinion because the "emerging" Socialist party into the forefront with Seattle's election of a registered Socialist councilman, is a politically scary thing to our tradition, where being a Socialist or Communist made you an enemy of the c... [See More](#)

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