The outlook in Olympia: A Governor's Ball followed by a government brawl

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Gov. Jay Inslee lays out his "polluters pay" tax plan just before the 2015 session of the Legislature. The Republican-controlled State Senate ignored it. The Governor is back for 2017 with a ... more

The Washington State Governor's Inaugural Ball, touted as "Washington's premier gala," is slated for Jan. 11 in Olympia, with political activists calculating whether tables full of oysters will be the pearls that induce them to fork over $105 admission, plus tuxedo rental.

The top agenda item for the upcoming legislative session suggests an old adage: There's nothing like a hanging in the morning to focus the mind.

The Washington Supreme Court is impatient, having said full funding of K-12 education must be in place by the start of the 2018-19 school year. The court expects the 2017
Legislature to deliver a plan to make that happen. Writing for the court's majority last October, Justice Barbara Madsen wrote:

"In its latest report, the state continues to provide a promise -- 'we'll get there' -- rather than a concrete plan for how it will meet its paramount duty." And, added Madsen, "A pledge, regardless of good intentions, is still not a plan for achieving compliance."

The key question, likely to keep lawmakers going through multiple special sessions: How are we going to pay for it?

Gov. Jay Inslee has offered up a $4.4 billion revenue package that includes a carbon tax, a capital gains tax on wealthy investors, and extension of the business and occupation tax for such services as lawyers and accountants.

Republicans, with a one-vote Senate majority, give thumbs-down to new taxes. They have argued that education can be funded out of existing revenues -- growing as Washington recovers from the Great Recession -- with sacrifices out of less-paramount duties.

The GOP hasn't been given much impetus to budge. Democrats lost four targeted state Senate races in 2014 and went just one-for-four in 2016, in bids to take back control. They needed just two seats.

Inslee unveiled a "polluters pay" tax package at a December 2014 ceremony at Seattle's REI flagship store. Senate Republicans ignored it.

Inslee may be fresh off winning re-election, but King County supplied his entire victory margin. The governor carried just nine of the state's 39 counties. He lost major population centers (Clark and Spokane counties) and barely squeaked through in Pierce County.

Inslee is a partisan. He spent 13 years in a divided, acrimonious U.S. House of Representatives before coming home to run for governor in 2012.

Does Inslee have abilities as a close-quarters negotiator to complement his hyperbole and litanies about the state's green-energy industries?

Maybe. The U.S. House of Representatives, then under Democratic control, in 2010 passed a major energy reform bill designed to cut carbon emissions. Inslee gets kudos from colleagues for helping work out a "soft landing" for polluting industries in the districts of nervous Rust Belt Democrats. (Republicans in the U.S. Senate killed the bill.)

Underlying the schools/revenue debate, however, is a classic contradiction in public attitude.
Washington voters have told poll-takers for years that quality public education should be the state’s No. 1 priority. They seem to understand our need to do better in science and math to fill jobs in a technology economy.

At the same time, however, Washington voters don’t want new taxes. They have voted for Tim Eyman “super majority” initiatives that would lock in place the nation’s most inequitable tax structure, and all the corporate tax breaks that come with it.

A complication: The charter schools battle has pitted teacher unions against education reformers underwritten by technology billionaires. Such is the rancor that two state Senate victors in November were sneeringly called “Democrats in name only” at post-election party forums.

Still, Washington does have a history of bipartisan surprises.

The Legislature passed in 2005, and voters sustained, a state transportation package, in the midst of a court battle over Gov. Chris Gregoire’s 133-vote victory. A 2014 transportation plan made possible the November vote that approved Sound Transit’s huge light rail expansion.

The Growth Management Act of the 1980s came out of a divided Legislature. The state’s basic environmental laws, passed in 1970, were the product of a collaboration between GOP Gov. Dan Evans and Democratic state Sen. Martin Durkan, who was planning to run against Evans.

Hang on to your seatbelts; it’s going to be a bumpy ride.

To those attending the Governor’s Inaugural Ball, eat up at the oyster tables and schmooze far into the night. In the months ahead, you may have to eat crow and burn the midnight oil in negotiating.

As to Jay Inslee, who first ran for governor back in 1996, the words of Oscar Wilde apply: “When the gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers.”