

Smollett case offers a view of justice in Chicago

John Kass
Columnist

Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx used the Jussie Smollett case to let the rest of the world in on a truth about the Chicago Way just days before the election for mayor:

Chaos isn't a ladder. Not in Chicago. It's a pit.

And there's no way out for political fools, dilettantes and ambitious amateurs who fall in, like Foxx.

She has also dragged down her political patron, Cook County Democratic Party chair Toni Preckwinkle, who lost her campaign for mayor against former federal prosecutor Lori Lightfoot.

And since Smollett's case was so high profile – followed all around the world – everyone now knows how dysfunctional a town Chicago is, how corrupt and craven it can be.

"I think it (the Smollett case) has opened an opportunity for us to have conversations around what does justice look like," Foxx told WBEZ.

Oh, really? What justice looks like? In Cook County? Kim Foxx, that's so precious. Are you serious?

Since I was born in Chicago, with the smell of the Union Stockyards in my nose, I can't really tell you what justice looks like with Kim Foxx leading the parade.

But I can tell you what desperate politics looks like.

And I'm going to tell you some of it today, including a story about the desperate emails sent to Foxx's employees, asking them to come up with examples to support her foolishness with Smollett.

And about Foxx's so-called "recusal" from the case, which wasn't a true recusal. It was a story, the kind Chicago politicians tell to children and journalists.

Foxx's troubles began when she inexplicably compromised herself ethically through inappropriate contacts with Obama Celebrity Friends who wanted her help with the Smollett case.

And then she dropped charges against Smollett – charges approved by a Cook County grand jury – alleging that the Hollywood star of the TV show "Empire" faked his own hate crime and blamed it on supporters of President Donald Trump.

Remember all that high-minded talk about Foxx having "recused" herself from the Smollett case, on account of Foxx compromising herself with Obama Celebrity Friends who were supporting Smollett?

Foxx really didn't recuse herself. Not legally. Not at all.

"The State's Attorney did not formally recuse herself or the Office based on any actual conflict of interest," her spokeswoman, Tandra R. Simonton, said Wednesday in an email response to my questions. "As a result, she did not have to seek the appointment of a special prosecutor under (state law)."

Instead, she put her first assistant, Joe Magats, out front to take the beating that would come.

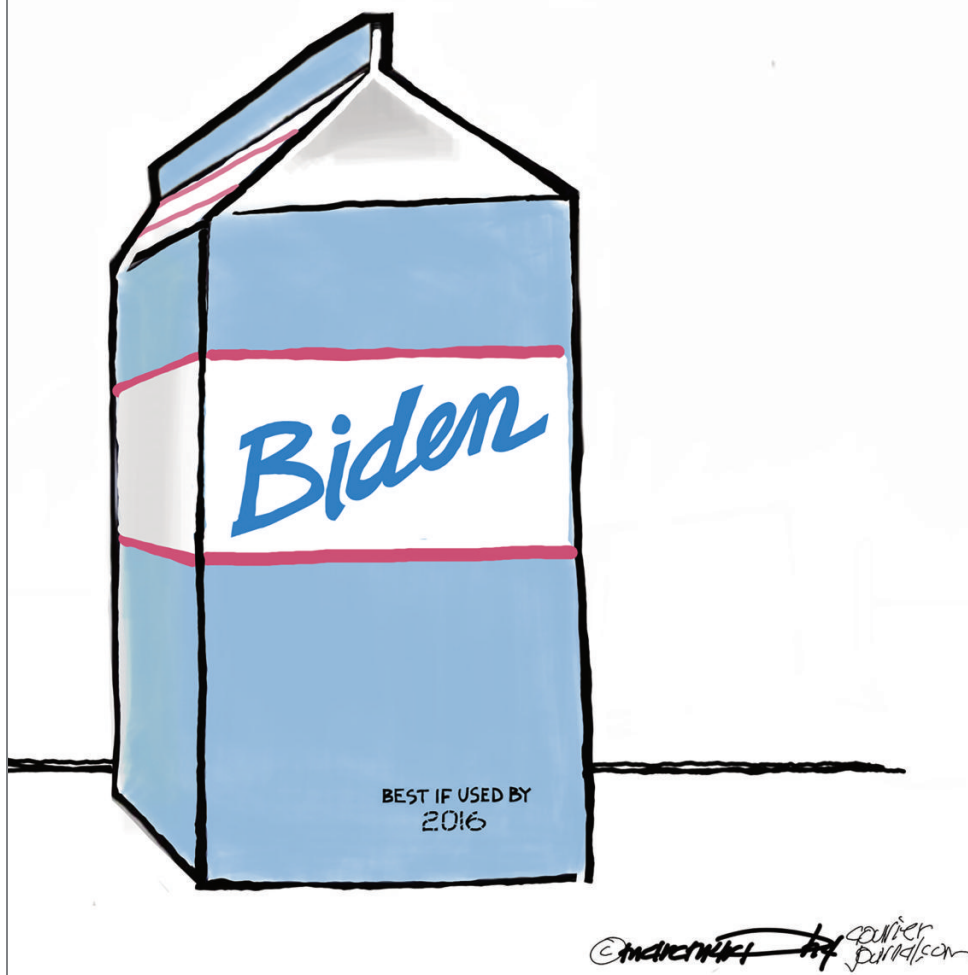
And then came that panicky email Foxx's office sent out, asking prosecutors for "examples of cases, felony preferable, where we, in exercising our discretion, have entered into verbal agreements with defense attorneys to dismiss charges against an offender if certain conditions were met, such as the payment of restitution, completion of community service, etc. but the defendant was not placed in a formal diversion program."

In other words: Please help me. I've screwed up, and I need examples to show people that what I did is really not all that unusual.

I asked a Cook County judge about this.

"How stupid is it to put in writing that you're advertising for excuses after the fact?" said the judge.

No further questions, Your Honor. Contact John Kass at jskass@chicagotribune.com



Walz's transportation plan is right for Minn.

Your Turn
Ken Martin
Guest columnist

Minnesota has some of the highest quality of life in the country thanks to the investments we make in our schools, in our environment and in the people of our great state.

Unfortunately, there's one big area we're falling behind: our infrastructure. Our roads are full of potholes, our bridges are deteriorating and something needs to be done. Luckily, our state has leadership with the courage and foresight to tackle this problem.

DFL Gov. Walz has put forward a budget that will make major and much-needed repairs to our roads and bridges, funded by an increase in the gas tax. This is a common-sense, fiscally responsible solution that actually fixes problems Minnesotans face, rather than kicking the can down the road or putting expensive repairs on our state's credit card.

Republicans would have you believe the choice is between an increased gas tax and no costs whatsoever, but that's a false choice.

We know that if our roads are not maintained, Minnesotans will pay the price. Anyone who has felt their car lurch as they hit a pothole and heard the horrible sound it makes knows they'll be paying to fix the damage done to their vehicle sooner or later. After hitting several in a row, most Minnesotans I know

are ready to try and fill in those potholes themselves.

The choice here is clear: We can fund road repairs now or spend that money fixing our vehicles.

The DFL solution, repairing our roads and bridges, will actually solve this problem going forward, whereas the GOP solution, do nothing, only serves to delay needed action all while our roads continue to deteriorate and we continue to pay the price at the auto shop.

The options presented here by the DFL and the Republicans say a lot about our two parties. The Republican plan is the same "you're on your own" approach they've taken on issues like health care or our environment. If your vehicle is damaged by potholes, pay for it. If your local roads or bridges are unsafe, tough luck. Just keep your head down and hope that the price of our poor infrastructure falls on someone else.

To DFLers, that's unacceptable. We know that we have a duty to support one another, and we know that it's our government's job to ensure we tackle our common problems together. You can see that in our push to expand health care access, guarantee strong public schools, and now in Gov. Walz's push to fix our infrastructure.

This is a problem we can tackle together or face alone, so let's take care of it as One Minnesota.

This is the opinion of Ken Martin, chairman of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) Party.

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Anyone who has read a bill, statute or law knows that legislators certainly need to tap experts in drafting the fine points of bills. It's not surprising those experts represent constituencies they consider important.

However, there is a big difference in that approach compared to a legislator

— knowingly or not — becoming the last-step rubber stamp for a special interest trying to profit off or protect itself from the will of the people.

Voters, it's time to ask questions. It's time to demand transparency.

It's time to seriously reduce "copy/paste/legislate" in Minnesota and across the nation.

This is the opinion of the Times Editorial Board, which consists of News Director Lisa Schwarz and Content Strategist Randy Krebs.

Banaian

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But that surface would be impermeable, and this would increase runoff. If not done smartly we may trade one problem for another.

As plastic continues to filter into our

oceans, icebergs and atmosphere, I hope more people will start to look for solutions. It would be better to figure out more high-valued uses for recycled plastic rather than hoping another country will buy our dirty bottles.

This is the opinion of Barbara Banaian, a professional pianist who lives in the St. Cloud area. Her column is published the first Sunday of the month.



Leonard Pitts
Columnist

'Americans first': Just a wish?

It felt, with apologies to Yogi Berra, like "deja vu all over again."

In July, after all, it will be 15 years since a skinny guy with an odd name sang a hymn to American union. "There is not a liberal America and a conservative America," then-Illinois state Sen. Barack Obama told the Democratic National Convention. "There is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America — there's the United States of America."

Last week, another skinny guy with an odd name — Beto O'Rourke — sounded a similar theme as he kicked off his presidential campaign in El Paso. "Whatever our differences," declared the former congressman, "where you live, who you love, to whom you pray, for whom you voted in the last election — let those differences not define us or divide us at this moment. Before we are anything else, we are Americans first."

He surely didn't intend it, but his evocation of that theme only pointed out how drastically the nation has changed since Obama evoked it in 2004. Back then, it played as a necessary corrective to an era of political polarization, an inspiring reminder of shared values and common heritage. Fifteen years later, it just sounds like wishful thinking.

Which says less about O'Rourke than about the country he aspires to lead.

The notion of one nation, indivisible, once seemed a bracing and defining ideal, the bedrock to which we could always return. But succeeding years have shaken that bedrock until what was once bracing and defining now feels like a sugarplum fairytale, with no bearing upon the hard reality of us, here and now. Worse, it feels like a denial of the present state of our Union, of how deeply cracked is the foundation of this house.

The division is only nominally political. To the contrary, it encompasses geography, education, class, religion, culture, sexuality and, most of all, race. Yes, it is exacerbated by politics and yes, politics — specifically, the gleeful, playing-with-matches-in-dry-tinder opportunism of the Republican president and his apologists — has frequently been its proxy.

But ultimately, this division is about the simple fact that increasingly, we don't like us.

Think of the white man who went on a bizarre rant last week because he saw a Spanish word on the menu of a Mexican restaurant in California.

Think of political leaders at every level peddling Islamophobia and racism. Think of white supremacists with Tiki torches parading in a public park.

And think of how hate crimes have spiked, how bullhorns have replaced dog whistles, how bigotry has been called in from the margins and given a berth on primetime cable.

Into that fraught moment steps O'Rourke, invoking the secular faith of a nation comprising other nations and bound by a stated belief in human equality. "Before we are anything else," he says, "we are Americans first."

It stirs memories of a day before acrimony became permanent. You want to believe it because what else are you going to do? To not believe it is to make the country a failure. So you hope maybe he sees something you can't yet see. Or that maybe stubborn faith can make the thing true.

Right now, all that can be said for sure is that, last week, another skinny guy with a funny name told us we are one nation, indivisible. And maybe we are.

But that used to be a whole lot easier to believe.

Contact Leonard Pitts at lpittsmiamiherald.com.

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