Dan Walters: Legislature's deception on budget backfires

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Sir Walter Scott wasn't writing about politics when he sagely observed two centuries ago, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

But he could have been – and his poetry perfectly describes the ironic consequences of two deceptive California ballot measures drafted by Democratic politicians and their allies.

Last week, state Controller John Chiang invoked the intertwined provisions of the two measures, 2004's Proposition 58 and last year's Proposition 25, to cut off salaries and expense payments of state legislators because they failed to pass a balanced budget by the June 15 constitutional deadline.

Proposition 58 was written as a companion to another measure authorizing the state to issue $15 billion in long-term bonds to refinance short-term budget loans. Newly inaugurated Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger wanted a tough spending limit to accompany the bond issue but eventually blinked – a huge political misstep – and allowed Democrats to write a much milder measure. Its purpose was to make the bonds more palatable to voters, fooling them into believing that it would end deficit spending. But it required only that spending not exceed estimated revenues, without specificity or an enforcement mechanism, and was largely ignored.

Last year, Democratic politicians and their union allies placed another measure before voters to reduce the budget vote requirement from two-thirds to a simple majority, thus cutting Republicans out of the political equation, or so they thought.

Again seeking to manipulate voters into doing something they might not otherwise do, the measure's drafters included a proviso to punish lawmakers for late budgets by taking away their salaries and expense payments. But its language was loose enough, or so it was thought, to protect legislators from any actual income loss since all they had to do was pass a budget of any kind by June 15.

Democrats tested Proposition 25 by passing a gimmick-ridden budget just before the deadline, and Gov. Jerry Brown promptly vetoed it as being unbalanced. Chiang then decreed that
legislators wouldn't be paid because they failed to comply with Proposition 58, as innocuous as its provisions had seemed to be.

The explosion of outrage among legislators just proved that getting paid was the sham budget's primary purpose. And while they could probably satisfy Chiang by making a few cosmetic changes in the budget and passing it again, putting a new coat of lipstick on the pig would not resolve the underlying income-outgo imbalance.

Were Brown to accept it, moreover, he would be reneging on his promise to finally solve the long-term fiscal problem – one that began to emerge when he was serving his first stint as governor three decades ago, in part because of decisions he made at the time for expedient political reasons.

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