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Editorial: The Kingfish of Illinois

Gov. Rod Blagojevich shoved out his handpicked chairman of the Illinois Commerce Commission on Wednesday and replaced him with consumer advocate Martin Cohen, head of the Citizens Utility Board. The ousted Ed Hurley had three years left in his term on the ICC.

This allows the governor to boast that he's a champion of the little guy. But it's one of the more reckless moves he has made since he was elected.

State regulatory panels like the ICC are supposed to be insulated from the pressures of politicians and special interests so they can render a sober and professional analysis of issues before them. But Blagojevich wants none of that.

Recently, the governor tried to muscle Hurley and his four fellow commissioners by threatening to fire them if they didn't rule against Commonwealth Edison in a controversial rate case. The board, as prescribed by law, is holding hearings on ComEd's proposal to ease regulatory controls and buy electricity through an auction that would let the market set the price.

Cohen and CUB were leading the charge against ComEd, and the change at the top of the ICC helps the governor bend the agency to his will. He didn't have to fire the lot of them. He just needed one victim--no doubt figuring the rest would get the message.

Blagojevich's announcement mentioned none of this backstory, saying Hurley was moving on to an important new job as special director of emergency energy assistance. Among his duties? Coordinating "state agencies to launch an awareness campaign to notify the public about how to stay warm and healthy during the coldest months ... ," according to the governor's office.

This isn't the first time Blagojevich has monkeyed with independent agencies. He tried to pack the payroll of the Illinois Gaming Board, which ensures the integrity of casino operations in the state, with a politically connected lobbyist the panel didn't want. He also rendered the board impotent by dragging his feet for months on filling vacancies.

Blagojevich's move on the ICC is sure to please consumer groups who think it will bolster their efforts to derail the ComEd auction. But it sets a dangerous precedent. Special interests won't have to rely on a regulatory body to rule on the merits of any issue--they'll just have to get to the governor, who will clear the way, even if it means summary execution. This time, consumer groups won. Next time, they could take it on the chin from the ever-changing Blagojevich.

Remember, it was Blagojevich who named Hurley as ICC chairman just 2 1/2 years ago, to the great consternation of the same folks who applaud him today.

Since taking office, Blagojevich has worn more personas than Zelig, the fictional chameleon man invented by comedian Woody Allen. He has been pro-utility Rod, pro-labor Rod, he has even claimed to be pro-business Rod. Lately, with his poll ratings drooping and prosecutors sniffing around his administration, he seems to be repackaging himself as Huey Long Rod, like the Louisiana populist who was nicknamed "The Kingfish" because he would strong-arm anyone in sight, all, he said, to make the common man a king.

It's Blagojevich, though, who seems to think he was coronated.