

JACKSON — Call former Gov. Haley Barbour's pardons of over 200 convicted felons what you want – egregious, nonsensical or — if you're so inclined — justified. More worrisome, though, may be the volume of instances where pardons were issued but public notice requirements about them were not fulfilled.

It's a bizarre turn of events that has led to a court order to halt the release of some prisoners, the potential rounding up of others and wiping the slate clean for scores of people long out of jail.

The pardoning power of governors and presidents is a well-known and important part of executive privileges. It's there for deserving individuals who have simply exhausted all other avenues of possible reprieve.

More obscure to many – apparently even to some officials and their throngs of legal advisers – is Article 5, Section 124 of the Mississippi Constitution that succinctly requires proper advance public notice be made before a pardon request is granted by the governor.

In the case of scads of pardons issued Jan. 10, that didn't happen. Many public notices pertaining to cases in counties all over the state weren't published in the proper local newspaper far enough in advance of the issuance of the pardons. Many more evidently didn't run at all.

Even a cursory check of ads placed in a Jackson newspaper showed some of the public notices were scheduled to begin running Jan. 12, two days after the pardons themselves had been signed by the former governor.

This isn't about whether any one of the individuals Barbour pardoned was worthy or not. That's another debate and one that's usually rendered moot by the chief executive's right to release convicts and restore their civil rights.

Rather, this is about transparency and the public's right to know.

The circumventing of public notice law has been a problem at all levels of government since we formed one. And, quite frankly, I'm not sure whether it's better to say the governor's office was unaware of what is constitutionally-required or simply didn't bother to check.

A spokesperson for Barbour correctly pointed out after the story broke that the burden of notice falls on the individual requesting the pardon.

But it's valid for the public to expect someone at some level of government validated the notices were published properly before the executive orders granting the pardons were signed.

This is a prime example of the importance – and too often overlooked – principle of public notices that appear in newspapers and on their websites in this state and nationwide. They serve the public's right to know about what is happening with government and public officials within their communities.

And when public notice laws are abused – either by mistake or on purpose – a serious right of citizens, taxpayers and voters is compromised.

Now we're left to sort out how many of those pardoned were actually eligible. It's going to take time and money.

Some have discounted the outrage resulting from the mass pardons as political rhetoric. After all, a vast majority were no longer incarcerated.

It doesn't reconcile, though, a number of murderers were nearly handed back the right to own a gun. And some molesters were almost excused from registering as sex offenders.

Victims of such crimes deserve better.

And the public at large has a right to know. Always.

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