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### WITHOUT STANDARDS, NOTHING IS UNETHICAL

BURINGTON, VT - In a recent exchange between the Vermont GOP and Democratic Party, we see a prime example of how a lack of comprehensive ethical standards devolves a legitimate discussion into partisan rancor.

In short, Governor Shumlin has appointed the wife of an environmental advocacy group Executive Director to the top environmental protection post in state Government. The republicans pointed out the potential conflict of interest. The Democrats called the Republicans sexist and countered with an allegation that Lieutenant Governor Phil Scott's business has enjoyed favoritism.

What we've seen here is two legitimate questions about the ethics of public officials. Whether or not a conflict of interest exists in either case will not likely be answered because partisan politics have taken over.

Instead of a fact-based and informative debate on what constitutes a conflict of interest, we see attacks on the character of individuals. This is an excellent opportunity to point out the utter lack of ethics standards in state law.

If such standards existed, such as prohibitions on self-dealing, nepotism, and conflicts of interest, they would provide a much-needed context for this debate. And the parties would be more apt to focus on the facts in relation to the specific definitions in the law, instead of personal attacks.

Is it a conflict of interest to appoint the spouse of an advocacy group executive to a top political post? Despite best intentions to keep the relationship clean, a conflict is most likely inevitable.

Is it a conflict for a high profile public official to have business interests with the state he helps to run? Despite best intentions to keep things transparent, a conflict is most likely inevitable.

Even the strongest ethics rules will not prevent all conflicts such as this. But without a set of clear standards, we have no way to debate who crossed the line, because there is no line.

The proposals that have been in front of the Legislature for years would strictly and clearly prohibit the use of public funds for personal gain, they would require disclosure of financial interests so that we might have an informed discussion about conflicts of interest, they would prohibit nepotism to include family, friends, and business interests, and they would create an independent ethics oversight body to which complaints like the above might be taken for thorough review and response.

Recently, Campaign for Vermont launched [an online petition](http://www.vtethics.org) (*link: http://www.vtethics.org*) asking the Legislature to take up this issue. In two weeks, 500 people signed on. Including a number of lawmakers. We'll keep collecting signatures all summer, or until enough Legislators commit to action on this front.

Look, I know Vermonters like being different. We like to think our small state is above much of the fray we see nationally. And in most cases, we are. But with regards to establishing comprehensive standards for what defines ethical behavior by public officials, it's time Vermont joined the 47 other states that protect themselves from fraud.

*Cyrus Patten is the Executive Director of Campaign for Vermont. He lives in Williston with his wife and two children.*