

Role of Youth Office Aide Merited Closer Examination

Political cronyism, in Mayor Bernard Sanders' lexicon, apparently is in the eye of the beholder.

Exercising his particular brand of verbal legerdemain, he can transform favoritism into competence in the wink of an executive eye.

The secret, of course, is to watch the deeds, not the words.

After he unseated Mayor Gordon Paquette in 1981, Sanders pledged to eliminate cronyism in City Hall and appoint only competent people to city government posts.

Such a noble intention was praiseworthy.

But, on at least two occasions, he has departed from his avowed principles.

In naming Richard Sartelle, a campaign aide, to serve as his assistant, Sanders stepped beyond the boundaries of his own guidelines. While it is true that Sartelle was paid out of the mayor's pocket, questions were raised about Sartelle's ties to city government.

He played the role of Sanders' ombudsman. Sartelle had office space in City Hall; he had the authority to deal with city departments; and he often appeared to be the mayor's alter ego. Yet Sanders, who promised early in his first term to clarify Sartelle's status, never acknowledged him as a member of the mayor's staff.

Sartelle has since become citizen assistance officer for the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity.

In the second instance, Sanders picked Jane Driscoll, who has been described as his close friend and companion, to head the city's youth office, serving on a voluntary basis since shortly after Sanders was elected. The job was not advertised and Driscoll has been running youth programs without being responsible to any commission for their operation.

Now the Board of Aldermen, in passing the mayor's budget early this morning, has approved her appointment to the position at a salary of \$20,800 for the coming fiscal year. Money will be drawn from federal community development funds.

Sanders defends the action on the grounds that she is part of the high-quality administration he has been putting together. "Cronyism is hiring people for specific jobs because they are friends and not because they are qualified," he said. "If someone can explain to me that Jane is not qualified for the job, I'll listen to them."

Such remarks may intimidate some of the mayor's critics but they do not answer the



Editorials

fundamental questions that should be asked by the aldermen: Does the city really need a youth office that operates outside the jurisdiction of the Parks and Recreation Department? And what are Driscoll's qualifications for the job?

It is not enough for the mayor to point out that she has taken charge of youth programs. The mechanism for running them already was available through the department before she joined the administration. If Sanders wished to expand the programs, he could have told department officials he wanted to do so. Then it would not have been necessary to ask Driscoll to serve on a voluntary basis. If Sanders were convinced that she was competent to work in the field, he could have recommended her appointment to the department through standard hiring procedures.

But no evidence has been provided by Sanders as to Driscoll's qualifications to handle youth programs, except to say he is willing to listen to those questioning her ability. He has failed to prove she has the necessary competence in the field. Unless he could furnish such proof, aldermen had an obligation to the people of the city to find it for themselves.

The aldermen's timidity in challenging the mayor on the issue could indicate they were taken in by Sanders' sleight-of-words. If they felt the office should be funded, they should have taken a stronger stance and required that the coordinator's position be advertised to obtain the most qualified candidate. That the aldermen did attach such a requirement to the post of Arts Council director seems inconsistent.

Sanders' conduct in the Sartelle and Driscoll cases smacks of the type of cronyism that did not exist under the previous administration.

His high-handed disregard for city personnel rules, and the aldermen's failure to address the situation effectively, should be of concern to the people of the city.