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An injudicious raise

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Pretty much everyone concedes that New York state's judges deserve a pay raise, given that they haven't gotten one in a dozen years.

But 62 percent in *one shot*? That's approaching 5 percent a year since 1999 – more than *twice* what federal jurists have received over the same period.

No way.

Yet that's what the judges are asking from the new Commission on Judicial Compensation, through Chief Administrative Judge Ann Pfau.

Pfau wants the commission, headed by former city Comptroller (and mayoral candidate) Bill Thompson, to hike judges' salaries from \$136,700 a year to between \$192,000 and \$220,836.

Which is as much as \$42,000 a year *more* than Gov. Cuomo earns. (And he's returning 5 percent of that to the state, as are most of his senior aides.)

Pfau says her numbers are "prudent and responsible" -- adding that Thompson & Co. shouldn't be dissuaded by "the cost of the reform of past practices."

And people say judges are arrogant.

We can't imagine why.

Whatever the commission recommends will become law, unless the Legislature specifically says otherwise.

So, we wonder: Should Thompson be dissuaded by the fact that, as noted, federal judges have had their pay hiked by only about 2.3 percent a year since '99?

Or by the notion that, north of Manhattan, the current pay isn't considered to be an insult?

Sean Hanna, a Monroe County Republican and member of the Assembly's Judiciary Committee, says: "There is a line wrapping around the block of very qualified attorneys [just chomping] at the bit" to join the bench.

Yet Thompson's commission is expected to push through a "substantial" pay hike, in order to keep "the best and the brightest" on the bench – despite a compelling lack of evidence that the political bosses who actually name New York's judges have *ever* concerned themselves with finding "the best and the brightest."

Quite the contrary.

By way of background, the reason judges haven't had any raises is that Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver won't consider them unless his legislators get equally fat – and wholly undeserved – pay hikes, too. And the reason for *that* is that Silver knows that legislators are – quite understandably – held in such low esteem in New York that a stand-alone pay raise for lawmakers would be so politically toxic it would have a hard time passing.

Still, Thompson says he also favors raises for lawmakers – not surprisingly, given that having judges *and* politicians in his debt during a mayoral campaign couldn't hurt his chances.

But just because Silver sees a need to hold judicial raises hostage to hikes for legislators is no good reason for Thompson to follow suit. They need to be considered separately – period.

And, the imperious Judge Ann Pfau notwithstanding, Thompson needs to keep "the cost of the reform of past practices" very much in mind as he proceeds.

These are tough times for everybody.

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