

In Politics, Never Say Never to an Aggie

Familiar with the “never-always” problem? That’s when you lay down a hard and fast rule, and then eat your words when an exception comes along.

Consider the case of Gov. Rick Perry and Anthony Buzbee, one of the governor’s newest appointees to Mr. Perry’s beloved Texas A&M University System Board of Regents.

A governor reliably in league with business leaders and groups that want to curtail civil litigation and awards has named one of the state’s most prominent trial lawyers to a conspicuous and coveted post. It turned some heads, but nobody acted. Those most likely to take offense number themselves among Mr. Perry’s strongest supporters, like the Texans for Lawsuit Reform. They were trapped in a state of situational outrage, about which they declined to comment.

The first thing to know is this: Mr. Buzbee, like Mr. Perry, is a big Aggie; that is the term of art for serious, boosterish, generous alums, be they Aggies, Bears, Horned Frogs or Longhorns. He has run as a Democrat for the Texas House, served as chairman of the Galveston County Democratic Party and contributed to numerous Democrats. He has contributed more than \$200,000 to the Texas Trial Lawyers Association, which generally supports Democrats and is the primary opponent of efforts to restrain civil litigation and limit legal awards.

(The Texas A&M University System and the Texas Trial Lawyers Association are corporate sponsors of The Texas Tribune. Anthony Buzbee is a major donor to the Tribune.)

More recently, Mr. Buzbee has become a significant donor to Mr. Perry, having tossed \$250,000 to the political action committee formed in support of the Republican governor’s presidential bid, and more than \$73,000 to Mr. Perry’s state political accounts last year. He coached the governor after Mr. Perry’s stumbling and unprepared showings in the early presidential debates.

And Mr. Buzbee is a big, mean, ambitious, tenacious, fire-breathing Texas trial lawyer. Really big. Poster boy big. The kind of guy who draws arrows from tort reformers — people like, for instance, Rick Perry.

Governors have been rewarding generous and loyal supporters since the invention of governors and generous and loyal supporters. But Mr. Perry sometimes moves in surprising directions. He settled a bitter rivalry with the Democrat John Sharp (Mr. Perry won a snarling lieutenant governor’s race against

his former classmate in 1998) and asked Mr. Sharp, a onetime state comptroller, to work out a 2006 tax bill for him.

Mr. Perry later engineered Mr. Sharp’s installation as the chancellor of the Texas A&M System. Mr. Perry named an A&M grad to the University of Texas System board. He has named U.T. grads to A&M’s board. These zigs and zags are relatively rare, and don’t cause much alarm.

But a trial lawyer? A guy who has made millions, for instance, by suing the Texas Windstorm Insurance Association — the state-run, industry-financed risk pool for property owners in parts of Texas where storms are common?

Mr. Buzbee does not have to answer for that. He is an Aggie wanting to help Aggies. Mr. Perry has offered no public comment on the appointment; there’s no real reason to expect him to do so.

“The governor knows what I do for a living,” said Mr. Buzbee, who plays down the political dif-

University pedigree helps in the matter of a state appointment.

ferences, too. “I think we all moderate as we get older. I’ve kind of become apolitical, to be honest.”

So, in this case, have some others. The state’s tort reformers, quick to pounce on anyone making money by shoving piles of paper through courthouses, have been uncharacteristically silent.

Mr. Perry is one of their stars. He has played shepherd to many of their dearest issues during his tenure as lieutenant governor and governor.

Mr. Buzbee ran in 2002 as a Democrat for state representative against Larry Taylor, Republican of Friendswood, and got squashed. They have repaired whatever damage was done; Mr. Taylor, now a state senator, is Mr. Buzbee’s home senator and could have busted his appointment with a word. He didn’t.

Mr. Taylor is also leading the charge against lawyers who have sued the Texas Windstorm Insurance Association on behalf of insurance policyholders with damages from the last decade’s hurricanes.

The ironies are as obvious as the silence over the appointment. The political and business differences are outweighed by the Aggie rings on the fingers of the main players. “It’s not a Democrat or Republican thing,” Mr. Buzbee said. “It’s an A&M thing.”