

Denton Record Chronicle

OPINION Editorials

‘Warm up the royal jet!’

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A starry-eyed reformer from California has filed an ethics complaint against Texas House Speaker Tom Craddick for using about \$15,000 in campaign funds to charter a jet from Aspen, Colo., to Houston and to take his wife along on a separate trip to Lithuania.

The complaint won't get anywhere — Texas legislators have made sure the ethics laws allow such egregious conduct — but we're glad the complaint was filed, for it shines a brief light on the conduct of our elected officials and gives an indication of where their priorities lie.

Dave Palmer is a political gadfly who operates a Web site called noethics.net in California. He recently reported on his Web site that Craddick spent \$13,500 from his campaign fund to charter a plane from Aspen to Houston to attend the funeral of state Rep. Glenda Dawson in 2006, and that he also spent \$1,800 in campaign money to fly his wife, Nadine, along with him to a legislative conference in Lithuania. Palmer was shocked, and, naïve sort that he is, he filed a complaint with the Texas Ethics Commission.

Craddick's office says the charter was necessary back in 2006 because Craddick couldn't find a commercial flight to get him back to Texas in time for Dawson's funeral.

The speaker's spokeswoman also defended the expenditure for Mrs. Craddick's airfare to Lithuania, saying she went not just as a spectator, but also as a participant. The missus attended every meeting, Craddick's office said, a statement which, if true, might make her the first participant — ex officio or not — ever to be eligible for a perfect-attendance pin at a meeting for legislators.

Craddick's office needn't have wasted its time defending the trips. Because Texas lawmakers care so little about ethics, they have made sure that just about anything short of armed robbery is as legal as turning right on a red light after a full stop.

A politico can do just about anything he wants with his campaign money, and there is not much his donors, or anyone else, can say about it.

Most big donors, being special interests with lots of pet issues before the Legislature, don't much care. It was they, you may recall, who ponied up about \$1 million back in 2006 to refurbish Speaker Craddick's apartment in the State Capitol Building, equipping it with such goodies as a \$14,686 kitchen range, a couple of \$276 shower heads and two toilets at \$1,066 a pop.

There's nothing illegal about that, either; it's just shameful, like chartering a jet to get back from Aspen or taking your wife along on a junket to Europe.

Our plaintive little point is this: Campaign contributions should be used to run campaigns, not charter private jets.

A meaningful ethics law would make that clear, but there doesn't seem to be enough ethical legislators in Texas to get one passed
