

GOP hopefuls square off at gubernatorial forum



By [Joe McAdory](#)
Published January 29, 2010

What would Kay Ivey say to President Obama if given the chance?

“Well, I’d try to keep a straight face,” the state treasurer said with a laugh. “I hope you enjoy the rest of your short term, Mr. President.”

Ivey’s quip was one of several at Thursday night’s Alabama GOP gubernatorial forum at the Opelika Center for the Performing Arts that drew laughter and raucous applause from the near capacity audience of approximately 700.

The crowd watched Ivey, joined by former two-year college chancellor Bradley Byrne, Greenville businessman Tim James and Tuscaloosa legislator Dr. Robert Bentley, discuss a variety of topics, including gambling, taxation, education, economic development and health care, but they took fewer jabs at one another and more jabs at Obama and the federal government.

“They (Washington) have no business sticking their noses into our issues,” said James, who grew up in Opelika. “This man (Obama) is a liberal and believes this nation should be more like Europe. The only way to change him is to beat him.”

Ivey added, “Why do we want the federal government to manage health care with the efficiency they manage the postal service and the compassion of the Internal Revenue Service?”

Commenting on Wednesday night’s State of the Union Address, Byrne remarked, “He (Obama) has discovered that we need to do something about jobs ... Well duh. Where’s he been?”

Byrne appeared to have more supporters in the crowd visually, vocally and with the results of a straw poll, which was conducted at the conclusion of the 90-minute event. Byrne, who passionately spoke about his desire to establish ethics reform in Alabama, easily garnered the most votes with 311, or 56 percent.

“I had a preference before I came in and it was punctuated,” said Opelika resident John Reed. “I’ve been following Bradley Byrne for a while. I thought he made a lot of sense with his responses to a lot of the questions. But all of the candidates are qualified.”

Rounding out the count was Bentley with 86 votes (16 percent), James with 79 (15 percent), Ivey with 42 (8 percent), Bill Johnson with 9 (1.7 percent) and Roy Moore with 1 (0.2 percent). Neither Johnson nor Moore participated in the forum.

In his opening, Byrne said things a GOP crowd wanted to hear.

“I’m opposed to any taxes of any sort,” Byrne said. “I’m pro-life. All life is sacred and we have an obligation to protect the unborn. Marriage is a holy union between one man and one woman and nothing else. I passionately believe in the Second Amendment (right to bear arms).”

Faye Ross of Opelika also favored Byrne coming into the event. However, she may have a new front-runner.

“I had my mind made up when I came in, but I may have changed it,” she said.

Who may have changed her mind?

“The doctor (Bentley) did,” she said.

Bentley drew loud applause when he announced he would not accept a state salary until the state unemployment rate dropped back to “5 or 6 percent.”

“Our state is sick and it needs a doctor,” said Bentley, a dermatologist. “We’d better be getting people back to work. That is our No. 1 issue. We must create an environment which we can entice companies to come in. We need to keep down these frivolous lawsuits which discourage industries from coming into this state.”

Bentley also said he'd work to give companies larger tax deductions for hiring those already unemployed.

Ivey said one way to stimulate the economy was not to add extra taxes and fees to businesses.

"Existing firms are the backbone of this state and we need to provide for them," she said. "We also have to have a well-trained workforce."

James, whose father, Fob, was a two-term governor, believes much of Alabama's problems stem from reading – or lack thereof – at an early age. He pointed directly at the state's 40 percent dropout rate.

"If a child can read when they leave third grade, at grade level, they can make it," he said. "We have to teach every child how to read. If we do it across the board, prison numbers will drop, the dropout rate drops and we've created a viable workforce."

Bentley demanded that local school systems have more control of funds, rather than state boards.

"We need more flexibility at a local level," he said. "If we asked teachers what they need instead of the state board of education what they need, then we'd be better off."

Ivey, a former teacher, agreed.

"It's ridiculous that teachers must purchase products out of their pockets to do the jobs they were hired to do."