

Hello, Sunshine!

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How not to sell a state that's feeling the pinch

IT'S a great day in South Carolina, and if you don't believe it, ask Governor Nikki Haley. On September 27th the governor ordered the 16 directors of cabinet agencies under her direct control to change the way their employees answer the telephone. So now when phoning, say, the Department of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services or the Department of Employment and Workforce, callers are supposed to hear this cheery greeting: "It's a great day in South Carolina. How may I help you?"

Ms Haley says the new greeting will boost the morale of state workers and help her to sell the state. "It's part of who I am," she declares. "As hokey as some people may think it is, I'm selling South Carolina as this great, new, positive state that everybody needs to look at."

The blogosphere has been inundated with people mocking the new salutation and proposing alternative greetings. One suggestion: "It's still better here than Mississippi. How can I help you?" Another was more explicit: "Thank you for calling South Carolina where unemployment is high, morale is low and political leaders are very busy wasting your resources. How may I direct your call?"

The irony is that nothing is particularly great in the Palmetto State at the moment. The unemployment rate stands at 11.1%, the fourth-highest in the country. State workers have not received cost-of-living increases in four years and no merit-based raises since 2001. Cuts to their pension plans are now being discussed. Health-insurance premiums for 410,000 public employees, retirees and family members are going up by 4.5% in January. Medicaid payment rates to physicians were cut across the board by 3% in April, which is expected to lead to reduced services for the poor and disabled in rural areas.

And so it goes on. This year the state's public schools missed out on more than \$144m in federal stimulus money earmarked for teachers because the governor and her education chief refused to apply for funds which would have mitigated teacher lay-offs. The money was then redistributed to the other 49 states which did want it. A new order has gone out that South Carolinians who do not possess a government-issued photo identification card—who tend to be black and poor— will no longer be able to vote.

For a clincher, racial hostility seems to be alive and well. A white employee who recently left Santee-Cooper, a state-owned utility and one of the largest power providers in South Carolina, has filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission alleging that in late 2009 the man's supervisor sent some employees a text message with an image of a gallows, from which hung a noose and a sign saying: "For Sale, Nigger Swing Set". The complaint is under investigation.

Some state agencies have obediently begun complying with the governor's sunny directive; others have apparently not yet got the message. Or are they perhaps indulging in some daring bureaucratic resistance?