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After taking the extraordinary step of fining a utility in 2013 without revealing the reason, the state Public Utility Commission twisted itself into rhetorical knots trying to justify its secrecy.

Three years after the public agency draped itself and PPL Utilities in secrecy, the state Supreme Court ruled Wednesday that the agency, at long last, must meet its obligations for public disclosure. It reversed a Commonwealth Court decision that had maintained the agency's secrecy. A host of news media organizations across the state — including Times-Shamrock Communications, publisher of this newspaper — brought the case.

On Oct. 29, 2011, PPL diverted crews from a high-priority response to a freak snowstorm that disrupted power to 300,000 customers in the Lehigh Valley, to a lower-priority assignment, and declined to explain the decision. A whistleblower later complained by letter to the PUC, which opened an investigation. In August 2013, the PUC and PPL reached a settlement. The utility denied any wrongdoing but agreed to pay a $60,000 fine; the state agency, remarkably, agreed to the company's request not to disclose details.

State law covering PUC disclosure is more extensive than the Right to Know Law that applies generally to other state agencies and local governments. The Right to Know Law includes a provision, which often is abused by governments, that exempts from disclosure documents and data used in the course of "noncriminal investigations." The law covering the PUC includes no such exemption. Rather, it specifically states that all documents that the commission uses to reach a settlement with a utility are public records.

Yet the PUC refused to release documents regarding the PPL settlement. The public agency argued, ludicrously, that the documents were exempt because the appointed commissioners themselves — technically the "commission" — did not directly use the documents in reaching the settlement. The court rejected those rhetorical acrobatics, so the public finally will learn the underlying details of the wayward storm response.

Investigation puts scrutiny on lobbyists, political ties ***Philadelphia Daily News*** **Kathleen Kane all over again**	The decision should be a precedent for future PUC settlements. But in secrecy-happy Pennsylvania, watch for legislators to decide that the PUC shouldn't have to disclose so much about how it deals with regulated legal monopolies. – ***Wilkes-Barre Citizens' Voice*** **editorial** ——————————————————— The Minnesota legislature approved adding $35 million to the state's grant program to build out high-speed Internet connections across the state. Lawmakers galore highlighted that spending plan in the final days of the legislative session. Less noticed were changes lawmakers backed in how that money would be spent. The broadband language exempts certain construction work from the prevailing wage law, **which dictates that workers must be paid specific amounts set by the state**. While most of the work done to connect Minnesotans to the Internet still must obey the prevailing wage requirements, "the last-mile hook-up" will be exempted, said Rep. Ron Kresha, R-Little Falls. As he explains it, installation of the larger fibers that serve as main spokes will still have to pay the higher wages, but the wages of those who install fibers down individual driveways will be exempt. The broadband language also resets the state's goals. For years, the state said in law its goal was that "all state residents and businesses have access to high-speed broadband" by 2015. Since that day came and went, the measure now says the state's goal is that "all Minnesota businesses and homes have access to high-speed broadband" no later than 2022. – ***St. Paul (MN) Pioneer Press*** ——————————————————— Nearly 40,000 striking Verizon employees, including about 500 employees in the Lehigh Valley and Berks County, will return to work Wednesday after reaching a tentative contract agreement that includes 1,300 new call center jobs, nearly 11 percent in raises over four years and the first contract for Verizon wireless store workers, a union said Monday. The tentative pact, announced by the Communications Workers of America union, stands to end one of the largest strikes in the United States in recent years. Workers and Verizon Communications Inc. had reached an agreement in principle Friday but hadn't released details or a date for the workers' return. "This contract is a victory for working families across the country and an affirmation of the power of working people," CWA President Chris Shelton said. New York-based Verizon had no immediate comment. The company has said Friday's agreement in principle makes "meaningful changes and enhancements" that will make its wireline business more competitive. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers union, which represents about 10,000 of the striking workers, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Union members will vote on the deal after returning to work. Besides the raises and new call center jobs, the tentative agreement includes $1,250 in signing bonuses and health care reimbursements for new workers, a 25-percent increase in the number of unionized crews maintaining Verizon's utility poles in New York state, and three 1 percent increases in pensions, which Verizon had proposed to freeze, the CWA said. The first-time contract for wireless retail store workers affects 70 of them. "Together, we are turning the tide from cutbacks against working people to building a stronger labor movement and strengthening the power of working Americans," said Dennis G. Trainor, vice president of the union's District 1, which includes New York, New Jersey, New England and eastern Canada. Installers, customer service employees, repairmen and other landline and cable workers in nine Eastern states and Washington, D.C., struck in mid-April after working without a contract since last August. During the strike, other workers have stepped in, but there were some delays in installations of Verizon's Fios fiber-optic service. The strike made its way into the presidential campaign. Democratic front-runner Hillary

Clinton visited strikers outside a Verizon store in midtown Manhattan, and rival Bernie Sanders cheered workers on a picket line in Brooklyn. The unions said they were striking because Verizon wanted to freeze pensions, make layoffs easier and rely more on contract workers. Verizon said that it had high health care costs for its unionized workers, which have shrunk as it sold off large chunks of its wireline unit and focused on its mobile business, which was not unionized. It also wanted the union workers, just over one-fifth of its U.S. workforce, to agree to move around to different regions when needed, which the union opposed. Some 45,000 Verizon workers went on strike for about two weeks in August 2011. – ***Associated Press*****;** **more from *New York Times***

Progressives have long argued that the federal government must protect the Internet from discrimination by treating service providers like Comcast as public utilities. Now we learn that the Net doesn't have to be neutral, as long as Google is the company targeting legal businesses that are politically unpopular.

Google recently announced **in a blog post** that the search engine would no longer run advertisements for payday loans with high interest rates and a 60-day-repayment period. "Ads for financial services are a particular area of vigilance given how core they are to people's livelihood and well being," the company wrote. Google hopes that "fewer people will be exposed to misleading or harmful products." Google has won plaudits for serving as a force for global good, though consumers might not want financial advice from a Web company: Payday customers tend to understand the terms and see the loans as their best option. Google's paternalism may leave some people having to go to loan sharks.

The decision doesn't flow from a great awakening against usury: The venture capital arm of Google's parent company, Alphabet, has invested in LendUp, a company that offers short-term loans at high interest rates and competes with payday lenders. Google told us that the relevant LendUp ads will be blocked, which is at least consistent. Yet Google also invested about $125 million in the online Lending Club, and who knows if that firm will pick up customers from the ban.

Any company is free to nix advertising, though Google usually resists. The tech giant ignored warnings from regulators that it must yank illegal advertising from Canadian pharmacies, which resulted in a $500 million settlement with the Justice Department in 2011. Google only banned ads that show pornography in 2014. Yet suddenly payday lenders are public enemy No. 1? Google's timing is also curious, given that the federal Consumer Financial Protection Bureau is finishing up a rule to wipe out the payday industry by cutting a lender's ability to collect. This political assault includes Justice Department investigations into banks that do business with payday lenders, which are also lawful outfits.

You don't have to be cynic to wonder if Google isn't providing some cover for this political campaign; the Obama Administration has certainly done a lot for Google. The company's top lobbyist had visited the Obama White House 128 times as of October 2015—more than counterparts at Comcast, Facebook, Amazon and Verizon combined, according to the nonprofit **Campaign for Accountability**. Last month the White House endorsed a Federal Communications Commission proposal that would allow Google to pirate television content, and last year the FCC exempted Google from its net-neutrality regulatory scheme.

Activists who purport to care about equality and transparency on the Internet have gone dark, except for a few haikus about Google's socially responsible business practices. Perhaps they should be as vigilant about Google's intimate ties with the political powers that be. – ***Wall Street Journal***

A campaign to squash states' voter ID laws fell flat against the facts in Virginia. That's where a federal judge upheld the Old Dominion's law requiring voters to show identification at the polls. The Virginia Democratic Party argued that the state's requirement “unconstitutionally” suppressed voting by blacks, Latinos and young people. U.S. District Judge Henry Hudson didn't buy it. “Virginia has provided all of its citizens with an equal opportunity to participate in the electoral process,” Judge Hudson wrote.

The Virginia challenge is part of a much broader campaign to turn back voter integrity and to pry open the door to fraud. The campaign is being financed in part by leftist George Soros, who has vowed at least $5 million in funding, The Washington Free Beacon reports. But as prior cases demonstrate, simply demonizing voter-ID laws – which have increased voters' participation in some states – is a fool's argument. In Ohio, the Democratic Party had to find a different front group after a lawsuit filed on behalf of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative hit a snag. That group came under investigation for fraudulent voter registrations, The Beacon reported.

Voter fraud is a fact. Disenfranchisement via voter IDs is not. But that hasn't turned back liberals' courtroom antics to help schemers vote — and to presumably vote often — in this year's presidential election. – ***Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*** **editorial**