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## Where are they now? Former State Senator Jim Nielson

By [John Howard](#)



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Former Senate Republican leader Jim Nielsen, a courtly conservative who seems most comfortable in cowboy boots and string ties, spent 12 years in the state Senate and seven more on California's parole board before returning to the place he liked best: Yolo County. He didn't leave the Capitol voluntarily and, unlike many of his contemporaries, he wasn't forced out by term limits. Instead, Nielsen departed in 1990 the old-fashioned way--through a redrawing of his Senate district's boundaries engineered by majority Democrats that enabled Democrat Mike Thompson to take the seat.

Serving in the Senate can be tough, but serving on the parole board can be much, much tougher. The Board of Prison Terms--which, in 2005, was consolidated into the corrections department--decides release dates for prison inmates who have been sentenced to life with the possibility of parole. Except in the highest profile cases--such as Sirhan Sirhan or the Manson family members--the board members toil in obscurity. They travel constantly, but not to California's garden spots. They go from prison to prison to hold tribunals that determine the fates of hundreds of inmates convicted of society's most horrific crimes. It is a grueling job, and the burnout rate is high.

"That was the most arduous, stressful job I've ever done in my entire life, and at the same time it was the most rewarding, because I was involved in due process and protecting the public safety," said Nielsen, 61.

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But his life outside government is equally busy. He and his wife Marilyn--she's deputy director of the California Arts Council--have three teenage boys, and he runs a small cattle operation with interests in Fresno.

He leads a group called the California Alliance to Protect Private Property Rights that was formed to contest what it sees as abusive eminent-domain proceedings, and he served as an informal consultant to Governor Schwarzenegger's transition team. He also serves on a county redistricting advisory committee. He remains a regular columnist for the Woodland Daily Democrat, a role he's filled for more than three decades. "I've written that column since 1974, and during my Senate years, that column was distributed to quite a few newspapers," he said.

It is the dispute over the sanctity of private property, however, that has most engaged his interest, prompted in part by Yolo County's eminent-domain proceedings involving the 17,000-acre Conaway Ranch and the U.S. Supreme Court's 5-4 ruling last year affirming the right of a city to force property owners to sell to make way for private development.

Nielson misses state politics, but not the increasingly partisan nature of the state Capitol. "I'm vicariously involved in politics, helping the governor on his campaign and certain projects in the community--that's sufficient for me. I enjoy going to the (Capitol) building, and I miss the people. I miss Al Alquist; I miss Ken Maddy. I miss those relationships. But life goes on."

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*John Howard is the Managing Editor of Capitol Weekly.*

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