

## Remove Big Money From Political Process

My recent columns have described the problems this country faces in our efforts to protect the high standard of living that many have achieved since WWII. The economic issues are well known: exploitation of the natural world, increased competition from emerging countries, the gap between the need to reinvest the public's capital in infrastructure and the private sector's unwillingness to pay for it.

Since these articles are about money, this month let's follow the fresh trail from money to political power and then back again. I realize that most, if not all of the remedies I will suggest below have about as much chance of becoming reality as I do of winning the next lottery jackpot. But, you have to pay to play, and if you don't, there's no chance of winning!

Every reader of this column is well aware that economic power vests with those in control of our political process. This begins with the commercialization of the election process, followed by money's influence on legislation, then special interests play into the executive implementation of policy and finally, there are the huge payoffs reaped through ex-officials acting as consultants and directors of future government contract work.

The judicial branch does not serve to protect the public from money's influence on government. Vermont's current limit on campaign finance has drawn skepticism from the current U.S. Supreme Court. As on most issues, clever people can point to the U.S. Constitution and easily argue that the Founding Fathers never contemplated restrictions on the rights of individuals and companies to influence public affairs. There is not a sane person of any political persuasion who doesn't know that rich people and organizations buy influence, influence buys power, and political power begets more money.

I believe, along with many others, that total public financing of elections and equality of access to a plethora of media outlets is a necessity. democratic action can only take place within an equitable allocation of print, radio, TV, and live debate coverage for all candidates, regardless of their "war chests." There is no need for 30 second sound bites every five minutes as elections near.

Campaign contributions and spending need to be brought under control. This is the way to remove the influence of money from the electoral process. It is a reality every citizen recognizes, yet public outrage has yet to find a strong, collective voice.

The second area of politics that requires complete scouring is to undo the influence of lobbyists and special interest groups on legislative and executive processes. Current pressure to respond to the scandals surrounding Jack Abramoff has led the U.S. Senate to

consider a one year ban on privately funded travel and fuller disclosure of politicians' travel on corporate jets. Senator Bennett of Utah expressed outrage at the possibility of such disclosure, citing the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. It is a travesty of our republic that the right to petition the government is used to protect moneyed interests' ability to unduly influence legislators.

One solution out of our current political morass is to require absolute disclosure of all elected representatives' meeting schedules and to have tapes/videos of every meeting available to the public via the Web. There should be no room in public service for private deals. Public officials who spend time with representatives of partisan viewpoints ought to be required to give equal time to at least one representative from a group of opposing views. No gifts of any kind should be allowed to politicians or the family members of elected officials.

It is not so much term limits that affect the objectivity of our leaders as it is the monetary benefit they receive under the present system. Many qualified people do not go into public office because of the financial sacrifices that low paying salaries entail. In fact, politicians almost need to have donors because of the high cost of getting elected, living in Washington DC, and maintaining an informed research base.\

I would propose that elected officials receive salaries commensurate with what they previously earned, over the last three years, excluding investment income. In that way, candidates would incur no personal financial gain or loss due to their desire to provide public service. A small surtax on the gross income of all taxpaying entities would remove the need for special interest money and put all lobbyists on equal footing as they would be prohibited from spending money to buy influence.

Public officials have an honor bound pledge to serve and ought not to be privileged. They should drive their own cars and hunt for their own parking spaces. Elected officials at all levels should send their children to public schools, have their family's young adults serve in the nation's armed forces and avail their immediate families of public medical services.

The third area of our system that needs to be addressed is the widespread practice by politicians and their families of receiving financial rewards from cronyism. The halls of Congress are replete with consultants who are ex-officials and their ex-staff members. Last week, the former head of the U.S. Energy Department began selling foreign nuclear power plants to the U.S. government. This is a sign that we are in an unraveling period of the democracy that so many have died to protect. People ought to be banned for life from any situation where they or their families stand to personally gain from past government service.

A life devoted to politics was once considered a higher calling. In early Greece, voters were called upon to defend with their own persons the republic they formed. They were stakeholders at risk. Without that kind of personal risk, there is little sense of belonging or responsibility. Nevertheless, many talented citizens still yearn to serve the public but

they are unable to pay to play, and they abhor the sell-out that the current system requires.

The money that follows political power is a juggernaut that cannot be resisted by most individuals. We need help in putting an end to the rape and pillage of American public life by taking the money out of politics. Consider turning off your TV when political advertising comes on or write to your elected officials to demand full public election financing. You might even tell them that if they don't work towards throwing out special interests, you will work to throw them out! If we can pull this off, our nation's vitality will be restored. Without it, solutions to problems that ought to be easily redressed will remain impossible to implement.

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