

CRAIN'S

CHICAGO BUSINESS.

OUR VIEW

March 09, 2009

Illinois needs campaign finance reform

Prospects for political reform in Illinois have never looked better. That's not the same as saying it will happen, but we can hope.

The scandal of Gov. Rod Blagojevich auctioning off a U.S. Senate seat exposed Illinois to national ridicule. Illinoisans now realize just how far our political culture has strayed from the national mainstream.

The spectacle of a twice-elected governor marched off to jail gave us all pause, and an opportunity to reflect on our own complicity in the corruption that has come to define Illinois. Our eye-rolling, shrugging indulgence has played as large a role as the dishonesty of our politicians in allowing that corruption to flourish. If they're the alcoholics, we're the enablers, and it's time we stopped. Illinois can reclaim its dignity by curbing the flow of campaign cash that pollutes our politics and government. This state is one of only five with no limits on campaign contributions to candidates for state offices.

Bills pending in the state Legislature would impose limits similar to those in force at the federal level and in other states. No, they wouldn't purge money completely from the political system. Yes, there would be ways around them. But at least they would create new rules that could be enforced by officials all over the state, and we wouldn't have to depend on criminal investigations by the U.S. attorney in Chicago as our only check on government corruption.

Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan and state Senate President John Cullerton don't want limits on campaign cash. Party potentates maintain their power by dispensing money to favored candidates.

Ordinarily, Mr. Madigan's opposition alone would be enough to kill the idea. Lawmakers will buck their leaders only if somebody they fear more presses for reform. That's where we come in.

Pressure from the voting public, which has the power to turn the legislators out of office, could force them to act. So turn up the heat, Illinois: Call or e-mail your state senators and representatives and demand real campaign finance reform.

Chicago Tribune
March 8, 2009

Commentary

A bad reputation

By Richard L. Thomas

Because of the highly publicized episodes of political corruption in Illinois, this state is regarded as one of the most corrupt in the country. This reputation is probably deserved. The situation has gotten worse over time, and it is embarrassing.

Illinois citizens pay a price for our "style" of governance. We pay when state and local governments hire people on the basis of political clout rather than merit and when contracts are not awarded on a truly competitive basis. Moreover, our reputation for corruption discourages firms from bringing new jobs to Illinois.

Business executives typically consider a number of criteria when choosing a new location for investment: geography, availability of a quality workforce, tax structure, etc. They also consider the political climate, and it should be no surprise that Illinois has attracted very little new industry in recent years.

Illinois is one of only five states in the nation with no limit on political campaign contributions. I believe this is a key factor in the amount of political corruption that has infested our state. Well-financed special-interest groups have been able to extract favored treatment as a quid pro quo for their support, relegating other taxpayers to second-class status. This needs to stop, and placing limits on campaign contributions would be a good place to start.

It is ironic that American businesses obey the federal Foreign Corrupt Practices Act in doing business around the world. U.S. corporations often take the lead in urging developing nations to eliminate corruption and establish a rule of law that makes them attractive as business-investment locations. Yet illegal practices that are discouraged abroad are tolerated here in Illinois.

A bad reputation develops gradually. Mounting evidence over time establishes a national and global business perception of a state's political corruption, which often results in knocking it off the short list for investment. If we don't turn things around in Illinois very quickly, we will suffer the consequences in lost investments and jobs for many years to come.

Business investors want a predictable environment, where the rule of law can be counted on. It is about time we insist on this in Illinois.

Richard L. Thomas is retired chairman of First Chicago NBD Corp. and a member of CHANGE Illinois.

Chicago Sun-Times

March 7, 2009

EDITORIAL

State needs campaign cash cure -- right now

The blue-ribbon panel report stated the problem bluntly: "Illinois is seriously ill, suffering from overexposure to political money. This condition has produced a chronic infection that has been left uncontrolled for too many years."

Sounds like it was written yesterday?

Try more than a decade ago.

The quote comes from a report, "Tainted Democracy," issued in 1997 by the Illinois Campaign Finance Task Force, an august body led by then-Sen. Paul Simon and former Gov. William Stratton.

The report was written well before George Ryan, a Republican, went to prison after first infecting the secretary of state's office with campaign cash, then the governor's office.

And well before Rod Blagojevich, a Democrat, was caught allegedly trying to sell off a vacant Senate seat and awarding state business to his biggest contributors.

Illinois is like the patient who has been warned time and again about a spreading tumor but does nothing about it, then is surprised to learn the cancer is everywhere, the prognosis grim.

With wave after wave of scandal, Illinois government and politics have become the laughingstock of the nation, but our state suffers from more than an image problem. In such a climate of corruption, what CEO in her right mind would relocate her business -- with all those needed jobs -- to our state?

The "Tainted Democracy" report recommended putting limits on how much money people could contribute to local and state politicians, but like so many reform proposals in Springfield, it died a quiet death. In Illinois, with few exceptions, people still can give as much to a local, county or state politician as they want -- one of only five such freewheeling states in the nation.

With our state in post-impeachment crisis, now is the time for Springfield lawmakers to enact meaningful campaign contribution limits. That might seem like a no-brainer, but of all the political reforms being proposed, it will be the toughest to enact. For too many state lawmakers, the current system works perfectly well.

That's the greatest danger -- delay. If campaign finance reforms are not enacted now, while the latest political scandals are fresh and public outrage is high, they may never be.

In Illinois, sunshine laws already on the books are supposed to deter campaign contribution abuses. In theory, public disclosure about who is contributing how much to which politician discourages dirty dealings.

In practice, we've seen how well that has worked.

That's why we support a bill sponsored by state Rep. Harry Osterman, modeled after the federal law, that would put firm limits on campaign contributions made to local politicians.

Individual contributors would be limited to \$2,400 per politician for each primary and each general election.

Businesses, unions, associations and political action committees would be limited to \$5,000 each under the same circumstances.

Legislative leaders, too, would be limited in how much money they could transfer to candidates for office throughout the state, putting an end to their common practice of pouring hundreds of thousands of dollars into tight contests.

We know -- and you know -- that contribution limits alone won't turn Illinois into Minnesota overnight, especially if the limits are not policed, which is why this page will be promoting other badly needed political reforms in the coming weeks.

But contribution limits do make it tougher for crooks to be crooked, deprive big money of its excessive clout, and give political newcomers a better chance to compete.

We'll be watching to see who in Springfield is serious about reform, and who's just talk.

We'll name names, the good and the bad, and come election time, we'll remind you where your representatives stood.

If Illinois is not ready for reform by now, it may never be.

The Moline Dispatch and The Rock Island Argus

March 13, 2009

Editorial: Don't enable corruption

Want Illinois government reform? Illinois lawmakers certainly want you to think that they do. Real reformer Cindi Canary has several pages listing bills introduced to clean up government since our former governor's arrest and removal from office.

Of course, the director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform has no delusion that most, or even some, of the hundreds of measures introduced by lawmakers hoping to score points at home in Rod Blagojevich's political wake will ever become law. The most important of them sit in the House Rules and Senate Executives committees, the traditional places leadership sends ethics reform to die.

That hasn't stopped Ms. Canary and an unlikely coalition of business leaders, government reformers, civic, religious and non-profit groups from coming together in an effort to make a lasting difference in Illinois. Change Illinois members hope to circumvent reluctant lawmakers and party leaders by trading on the citizenry's anger at the rampant corruption in Illinois politics. If our ex-governor did Illinois any favors, it is that his political escapades appear to have created the perfect storm for real, lasting change. Or at least that's what Change Illinois is hoping. To be sure the effort isn't wasted, the group is concentrating primarily on bills that would limit campaign contributions.

Money, the group's leaders say, is the root of political evil. And it's hard to argue the point. Illinois is one of only five states in the union that does not have any limit on campaign contributions. Worse, the state's weak reporting requirements and enforcement are so lax that the state is routinely called "the Wild West of campaign finance." Consider, for example, that ex-Gov. Blagojevich collected more than \$60 million in big money, more than three times as much as former Gov. Jim Edgar. Some 35 percent of Blagojevich's campaign cash came from contributors who gave \$25,000 or more and half of big-dollar donors got state contracts or appointments, Illinois Change says.

The big dollar contributions also directly affect what happens in Springfield. "It's about what gets put on the agenda," Ms. Canary told us. Ron Bjurstrom of East Moline is a member of AARP's state lobbying team. He told our editorial board he experienced firsthand what money can buy when he accompanied a friend to talk to a member of General Assembly leadership. The leader was called off the Senate floor to talk to his companion, who happened to be a large donor. In all his time working for AARP, Mr. Bjurstrom said, he never had that kind of access to leadership.

As Peter Bensinger, former administrator of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, and chair of Change Illinois, told our editorial board Tuesday, Illinois government "is not even dysfunctional; it's disgraceful."

Despite all evidence to the contrary, Speaker Michael Madigan and Senate President John Cullerton continue to say money isn't the problem. The Chicago Democrats suggest that the issue is disclosure. To which we say nonsense, particularly when leadership fights tooth-and-nail almost any efforts to bring more sunshine into the process. Besides, their real opposition to contribution limits is that it will take away a chunk of their power over individual legislators. Leaders enjoy limitless ability to help members with re-election efforts. In turn, those members are directly beholden to those leaders for their very jobs.

Who's to blame? Well, it's not just greedy lawmakers. Illinoisans should look no further than the mirror on the wall. Or as Crain's Chicago Business put it in a March 9 editorial, "Our eye-rolling, shrugging indulgence has played as large a role as the dishonesty of our politicians in allowing that corruption to flourish. If they're the alcoholics, we're the enablers, and it's time we stopped."

What can be done? Join with Change Illinois and support HB24 and SB1767 which would set campaign contributions for individuals at \$2,400 and for PACs, businesses, unions, associations at \$5,000. The two bills also set up stiff fines for non-compliance. Of course none of that works if the Illinois State Board of Elections isn't given the resources it needs to police new reporting requirements. Increased funding and support for that critical watchdog group must be part of any reform effort. None of that will happen, however, if ordinary voters don't do their part.

Stop being an enabler by removing the source of their addiction: Tell your local legislators (their contact information is in the accompanying box) to support the effort to limit campaign contributions.

Make it clear that if they refuse to be weaned from big money, they will pay a stiff price -- at the ballot box. Just say no:

Write, fax, call or e-mail:

Sen. Mike Jacobs, 606 19th Street, Moline, IL 61265, (309) 797-0001, fax (309) 797-0003; e-mail jacobs@sbcglobal.net.

Rep. Pat Verschoore, 1504 3rd Ave., County Office Bldg. 2nd Floor, Rock Island IL, (309) 558-3612 Fax (309) 793-4764, e-mail - pverschoore@patverschoore.com

Rep. Mike Boland, 4416 River Drive, Moline, IL 61265, (309) 736-3360, fax (309) 736-3478, e-mail ilrepmikeboland@aol.com.

Sen. Tim Bivens, R-45th, 629 N. Galena Ave., Dixon, IL 61021 (815) 284-0045; fax (815) 284-0207; senatorbivens@grics.net