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Time for the public to buy back its politicians

By Robert C. Fellmeth
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Like the historical Greek figure Diogenes, California voters tenaciously carry their lamps – searching for an honest politician. We have rejected Gray Davis and now appear to have left the frying pan for the fire of Arnold Schwarzenegger. Both parties seem to use the same reviled "special interest label" to apply to big business (if a Democrat) or public employees and labor (if a Republican). Of course we know that both are organized around their respective short-term economic interests. And we know that the real losers in a political world controlled by these campaign funding "players" are those who organize with difficulty: Consumers, the dispossessed and especially future interests – ranging from the Earth to future taxpayers. The interests of children receive the shortest shrift in a world of private finance influence.

As we now ponder the spectacle of initiatives being marketed and attacked with sound bites, we might inquire into who is paying for them and why. Then we should ask the larger question: How much longer are we going to tolerate corrosive campaign finance as the determinant of public policy and of our public officials? Sacramento has 1,300 registered lobbyists. That does not include all the attorneys up there. Those representing only the interests of children? One.

And the 20,000 lobbyists in Washington, D.C., suffer similar imbalance. Those with a vested, immediate profit-stake in public policy dominate advocacy and political money. More and more money is needed for election. More and more is organized by horizontally organized business or trade groups.

We have lobbied for consumers and children at the national and state levels for 25 years. Don't let anyone tell you that decisions are made on the merits. The money paid in buys access, and access determines results. Over and over again. We have rejected a governor who operated a shameless money solicitation machine. Now, we have one who has called and raised him by \$30 million. His ultimate conceit is that such money is not corruptive because it corresponds to his pre-existing philosophy.

Our reliance on money from political action committees has not only also compromised the current and past governors beyond their apparent ability to comprehend, it also infects the Legislature. Here is a body that defeats meritorious bills by putting them in a "Suspense File" so a single Appropriations Committee chair can kill them without vote – usually at the private behest of a campaign contributing interest.

This week we have yet another in a long line of outrages – it's the "gut and amend" process of approving special interest legislation at the last second without hearings – all to make certain that "alcopops" (the sweet liquor being marketed primarily to young girls) is taxed at beer rate of 20 cents a gallon rather than the liquor rate of \$3.

Here in San Diego we have a city giving some of its employees well over 100 percent of their highest salaries for the rest of their lives. It is unclear if their work performance justifies such a lengthy and extraordinary emolument.

And one also suspects that some of the local officials signing off on it did not devote their full attention to its implications. The undercover tapes of two City Council men do indicate attention to campaign funders.

But they are hardly atypical. Indeed, perhaps their conviction should cause some concern among their brethren – for the jury apparently convicted them not for working for a revision of the local strip club "no touch" policy – but for failing to seek the results expected in return for campaign finance help.

We have an interesting harbinger on the horizon – it is bribery if you take money in return for official acts performed, and a "dishonest services" felony if you take the money and do not perform. In opening the door to the possible criminal prosecution of every elected public official in the nation, this precedent might finally give our politicians some pause in their stubborn addiction to private campaign finance.

But a more fruitful option is best demanded by the body politic – let's take this money off the table by providing it ourselves. We need to buy our public officials, because those purchasing them at present do not represent our highest ethical sensibilities. And the preoccupation with the "here and now" is going to affect a lot more than the maintenance of levees and flood control down the road. It is increasingly reflected in child disinvestment. Reserving 1 percent of public budgets to make certain the rest is spent on the merits is rather a good investment.

The Clean Money Campaign is in San Diego. It is gearing up. Diogenes will not give us the answer. Removing the cause of the corruption is the answer – as two states and two cities have initiated in the last decade. America's Finest City ought to be its cleanest, and we should demand that it happen. Then we can show Sacramento how it is done.

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