

Moneyed political system drives budget extravagances

By: Jack E. Lohman

Why is it any surprise that the state's budget deficit is over \$2 billion and growing? The reason should be pretty clear: the system is designed that way.

Legislators spend money because they are paid to spend money. Not by you and I, but by the special interests who want laws passed that divert taxpayer cash, tax breaks and other state assets to their private coffers. The fat cats then use part of their booty to fund political campaigns, thus ensuring their future welfare.

It's a corrupt system that works for both the giver and receiver, but at the expense of the taxpayer. Bad as it is, there is an easy fix if the Legislature and governor have the will.

If we want to lower taxes and balance the budget, we must break the link between those who write the checks and those who write the laws. If politicians are to be beholden to their funders, let it be the taxpayers.

That's as it is in Maine and Arizona, in both cases put there by voter demand. For \$5 per taxpayer per year they totally fund their state electoral system. The Clean Money system in both states has survived court challenges because it is voluntary, and candidates may opt for the old system if they prefer it.

If there are only two kinds of money -- public and private -- doesn't it make more sense for the taxpayers to fund our public electoral system and own the government ourselves? Or should private investors, as it is today?

Think about it.

If you owned a company and your purchasing manager was taking money on the side -- from both your vendors and those who want to be -- and then making bad corporate purchases, wouldn't you put a stop to it?

Of course you would. In the business world we call it payola and kickbacks. Prosecutors call it bribery and extortion. Politicians call it free speech and campaign funding. But it's all the same.

In the business world we either fire these people or have them jailed. In the political world we reelect them.

Breaking this 'axis of evil' would save each taxpayer well over \$240 each year by eliminating the over \$1 billion our Legislature doles out each year in corporate welfare. Even more could be saved once old laws were revisited and the bad ones repealed. But the money link must be broken, not merely bent.

The fix is in...

In Maine and Arizona the Clean Money system works great. If you want to run for office you simply acquire a requisite number of constituent signatures, 80% of which must be accompanied by at least a \$5 check. That eliminates frivolous candidates, and it qualifies you to receive one third of the funds allocated for that race. (Up to \$100 may be given during the qualifying process, and all monies must be spent on legitimate campaign expenses. No other private money is allowed.)

If you win the primary you receive the remaining two thirds, but following the primary you cannot spend any more private cash, not even your own. If your opponent chooses to run under the current rules, and outspends you, the public grant provides additional matching funds (which discourages such practices in the first place).

Lobbyists are still allowed to lobby; they just can't lobby "public" candidates with cash in hand. For the fat cats who want to give more, they can give to those candidates running under the current, moneyed guidelines.

Maine and Arizona legislators love their Clean Money system because private fundraisers have virtually dried up and they can spend more time with their constituents and families.

Wisconsin should do it right or not do it at all

Senate Bill 104, a proposal by Sen. Mike Ellis (R-Neenah), seeks a 45% grant, but it simply doesn't go far enough. It would leave the fat cats still 55% in control of government, and in fact would give them a discount on their influence. Our tax money (the 45%) would be subsidizing the special interests even further than it is today.

A similar system in Minnesota was tried and failed, and that state's reform community is now seeking a 100% fix.

What Ellis should add -- and the governor should demand -- is a 100% public funding option for those who agree to shun private funds. Then let the candidates and voters decide.

Half a loaf

The taxpayers don't want a partially clean system; they want it totally clean. They want it today and are willing to fund it. And they won't buy the "budget deficit" as an excuse because the Clean Money system will return much needed money to the state's coffers and more than offset its costs.

Besides, if there is *any* reason to reduce political corruption, there is *every* reason to totally eliminate it. A bad bill is worse than no bill at all, and will delay real reform for years.

Private Money = Public Disgrace

A system that allows private money to fund political campaigns virtually demands the kind of conflict of interest that recently led to the indictment of five state leaders. Why legislators want to walk this tightrope and destroy their credibility in the process is beyond me.

Why business leaders don't put a stop to it is also puzzling. It is destroying our economy at both the state and federal level. Their businesses cannot be better off for it. Just look at the failed health care and tort systems if you are not convinced.

Listen up, folks!

Yes, I've heard the conservative's arguments: You don't want your tax dollars funding political campaigns or politicians you don't agree with. But taxpayers *already are* funding the elections; we're just doing it through the back door -- in hidden taxes, and out of our sacred general funds -- and at dozens or hundreds of times more than if we funded them up front with clean dollars. This is an investment we can't afford not to make.

And while we accept that the taxpayer should pay for *part* of the public electoral system -- voting machines, poll workers, election oversight boards, and even the politician's salaries while they are campaigning and fund raising -- the short-sighted will flatly reject the idea of paying for the one thing that has totally corrupted the system: campaign funding.

As well, legislators spend money on a lot of things I don't like, but they are paid to do it for the common good. (And sometimes they do.) However, on all spending decisions -- whether I support the special interests or not -- I'd feel a lot better if I knew that cash wasn't changing hands in the process of laws being drafted and voted upon.

It is *because* I am a fiscal conservative that I support full public funding of campaigns. That is the only way we will curb unnecessary government spending and eliminate our state's budget deficit.

The reality is, no matter what your core economic or social concern, it is almost always directly traceable to the special interest money in -- and influence upon -- our political system: High taxes, sky-rocketing health care costs, exorbitant prescription drug costs, weak environmental laws and enforcement, under-funding of our schools, you name it. Follow the money and you'll ultimately find a politician.

Welfare for politicians

Pols like to call the Clean Money system "welfare for politicians" to mask their true opposition, but that's a red herring. Nothing can do more to ensure their welfare than the current moneyed system that gives them a 16-to-1 cash advantage over challengers and a 9-to-1 electoral advantage. They like things just as they are, thank you.

As a 45-year Republican I'm continually amazed to hear my conservative colleagues complain about "big government spending" on one hand, yet on the other they sit idly watching the fat cats fuel the corrupt system that breeds it. They criticize critical school spending and ignore corporate welfare abuses. Will they ever grasp the link? Is this really what we want to leave our kids?

Conservatives also like to indict campaign reform as an "infringement on free speech." But money is a possession, a "thing" not deserving of constitutional rights. My money or wealth should not be able to be used to drown out your voice and equal protection under the law.

Besides, when money equals speech, speech will no longer be free. The way it is today, only those with enough "speech" in their checkbooks have a voice in government. That's not the democracy we should fight for.

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