

Gifts to Lawmakers Are a Slap at Taxpayers

By Jon Coupal

Two years ago, when then Assemblywoman Sally Lieber introduced a bill to prohibit the spanking of children, she was ridiculed for what many Californians considered to be frivolous legislation. In light of recent revelations of the "S & M" tinged escapades of a married, middle-aged lawmaker and one or more lobbyists, some capitol observers are wondering if Lieber should have targeted an older demographic.

Although the just-resigned legislator, who described his conduct to a colleague unaware that he was also sitting before an open microphone, now says he made it up, it calls into question just what services and gifts are provided by lobbyists in an effort to influence legislation. After all, the lobbyist with whom the official claimed to have this special relationship had business before a committee on which he served as vice-chair.

The Sacramento Bee recently completed an analysis of gifts, over and above campaign contributions, that are provided to California lawmakers. The Bee found that between January 2008 and June 2009 lobbyists gave legislators, their staffs and relatives about \$610,000 in gifts.

While interest groups are limited to \$420 annually in gifts to an individual lawmaker, loopholes allow unlimited gifts directly to their relatives and friends. The more than 2,700 registered lobbyist employers are eligible to give the \$420 maximum to each leader and to most staffers.

In addition to fine dining, popular gifts are tickets to sporting events and concerts ranging from Billy Joel to Britney Spears and free travel to destinations from Hawaii to Hungary -- free travel and expenses can be provided to exotic locals so long as the lawmakers participate in a conference or gathering.

While 30 lawmakers accepted gifts totaling over \$5,000, and some much more in the period examined by the Bee, 30 offices, to their credit, accepted less than \$100 per month.

While average taxpayers, those lucky enough to still have jobs, may be brown bagging it for lunch, it is more than ironic to find that on the list of restaurants at which lawmakers had dined on someone else's dime was the Humuhumunukunukuapa'a Restaurant in Hawaii.

Lawmakers accepting these gifts insist that these gratuities have no influence on their legislative activities. Really? Then why do lobbyists bestow them? This is what causes many critics to call it legalized bribery.

Former Sen. Sheila Kuehl told the Bee that she sees gifts as a problem, not because they influence votes, but because they cause the public to lose confidence in the politician who accepts them. While her point about public confidence is correct, it is more than likely that some legislators will tilt toward those who have made them feel important with gifts of travel, fine dining and concert tickets. If the gifts do nothing else, they buy access so that lobbyists can make a pitch for the interests of their clients. This is access to lawmaking that is not available to average Californians.

Also of interest are those who gave the most. These include lobbyists representing utilities, alcoholic beverage distributors, entertainment companies and unions representing state employees. Considering the latter, how can anyone argue with a straight face that accepting gifts from state labor groups, on whose pay and benefits a lawmaker will decide, doesn't create a clear conflict of interest?

Of course, these are only the gifts that are reported. There can be no doubt that there are other services provided to lawmakers by lobbyists that slip under the radar -- unless, of course, someone is foolish enough to brag in front of an open mic.

While it may be impossible to completely root out influence peddling and bribery in the halls of the Capital, if the highest paid legislators in the nation, who receive an additional \$173 per day in expense money, want to wine and dine with lobbyists, let them go dutch. However, since the Legislature sets its own rules on what gifts can be accepted, don't expect members to adopt vows of poverty or chastity anytime soon.

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