



Welcome to COWS > About COWS > Newsroom > News

Keep the Government, Dissolve the People!

By: Joel Rogers

From: *Madison Capital Times*

Date: 7/29/2002

Still not sure that Wisconsin government is fundamentally broken and in need of sweeping change in leadership?

To erase any remaining doubt, you need only look at the death throes of our recent efforts at campaign finance reform. Karl Marx once observed that history repeats itself "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." We're somewhere around the 10th or 20th repetition on this one. Well beyond tragedy, well beyond laughter, what's left but shame?

For well more than a decade now, public-minded Wisconsin citizens have been suggesting ways to get beyond the enormous problem that organized money is creating for our politics. We live in a democracy, or a society that in its better moments still pretends to be one. In such a society, who controls government is supposed to be decided in free elections among equal citizens, with any upstanding citizens able to offer themselves for candidacy based on the quality of their character and ideas.

But this is no longer the case in America, or in Wisconsin. To run for office you first need money, lots of money, and if you don't have it yourself you must get close enough to people who do - irrespective of the quality of their ideas, much less their character.

Modern techniques of campaigning force even those who don't worship the Almighty Dollar to bow down before it. With citizens increasingly disabled and disorganized as far as political action goes, and our public airwaves almost entirely stolen by private interests, campaigns rely on paid media and polling to push and refine their message. An array of consultants tell them how to tweak the words and make the TV and other media buys, but all this is costly. To be a viable candidate, you need more and more money to feed the TV beast, the polling beast, the consultant beast.

Presto! Those with lots of money increasingly control what candidates say or whether they get to be "serious" candidates in the first place. That violates the basic democratic idea that people, not money, should rule.

There are two solutions to this problem. One is to insulate the campaign system from background differences in money - a strategy that soon runs into constitutional problems by regulating the "speech" of those who want to spend their money to buy the government. The other is to get enough clean public money into the election system that candidates without much money have the ability to play the game.

After a decade of back and forth on this topic, and no end of dispute among campaign reformers on how it all might best be done, Sen. Mike Ellis, R-Neenah, put together a proposal (SB 104) for general revenue funding of up to 45 percent of the costs of campaigns of candidates who agreed to cap their spending at certain levels. A favorite provision of mine added a poison pill for millionaire candidates who did not respect these levels. Their spending in excess of such levels would be matched by public funds to their rivals.

It was a nice bill, a clever bill, a constitutional bill. And it would have done wonders to open up our system - now reaching historic lows in competitiveness and debate.

So of course it was killed. Meeting behind the closed doors that the legislative leaders now retreat to for anything of moment, they instead produced a bill without any reliable mechanism for public funding, egregious limitations on private speech, a strange shift in citizen money from candidates to party chieftains, and an invitation to courts to overturn the whole bill if any part of it offends - which some parts clearly do.

In the trade, such a requirement to treat a complex law as a whole and only as a whole is called "nonseverability" and is familiar enough a strategy of those opposed to reform to be the stuff of jokes. Here's one from U.S. Sen. John McCain: " 'Nonseverability' is French for 'killing campaign finance reform.' "

Editorial comment on this charade has been uniformly negative. All the big special interest groups like the Realtors and Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce oppose it. So do all the good guy reformers like the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign and Common Cause, both strong supporters of the Ellis alternative.

Only the leaders of our government seem to be for it. As the poet asked: "Wouldn't it be easier in that case for the government to dissolve the people, and elect another?"

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. COWS is sponsoring "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. Go to www.sustainingwisconsin.org for more information.

Copyright © Madison Capital Times
