

ANOTHER VICTIM OF PRIVATE POLITICS

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Not having been involved in his campaign, I was quite surprised when Ron Gonzales phoned me, just after he was elected to his first term as San Jose mayor in 1999, and asked me to join four other community leaders as a “co-chair” of his transition team. I agreed and, orchestrated by the mayor’s able Chief of Staff Jude Barry, we had some meetings in the historic adobe mission dining room of my fellow transition “chair,” Santa Clara University President Paul Locatelli. We talked about the issues Ron should address during his first months as mayor. Then I emceed Ron’s first State of the City speech, in which he laid out this agenda, and arranged for it to be broadcast on KQED.

So I felt a little bit invested in Ron’s success as mayor of San José. A few weeks into Gonzales’ term, President Clinton was coming to speak at The Commonwealth Club, and we had the opportunity to invite a few people to a meet-and-greet with the president. Naively thinking this was a good opportunity for the newly elected mayor, I called Gonzales’ office to invite him. I never did get through to Ron, but the message came back from a scheduler, “The mayor does not travel to San Francisco.”

This interaction was typical of my later experiences with the mayor and his staff, and it characterizes what I have heard from others in the community. On matters large and small, Gonzales seemed to have little desire to interact with people, to put his opinions out on the table, to listen, to make alliances or work with others. He seemed to want to keep decisions close to his chest. In the culture of politics, elected officials are the mediators between various interests, and they need the gregarious personality and energy to engage with people, to discuss, to debate and move to decisions in an open manner. Gonzales’ makeup seemed unsuited for politics, and perhaps led him into the deal-making that eventually tripped him up.

But a deeper and more serious problem has deposited Gonzales in the dustbin of political history, as it were, and it is one for which Gonzales is not entirely responsible. One of the Santa Clara County district attorney’s main charges against Gonzales involves an expanded definition of bribery. The allegation in the Norcal Waste case is that Gonzales agreed that Norcal could pay their Teamsters recycling workers at a higher rate than the city expected. The resulting deal, about which Gonzales is said to have neglected to inform his colleagues on the city council, included a price increase of \$11.2 million for the city’s garbage contract.

Normally, a bribe refers to a situation in which a politician takes cash or other items of value and puts them in his own pocket in return for making a decision favorable to those giving him the bribe. In the Norcal case, the DA is arguing that the political support Gonzales may have obtained from the Teamsters, rather than money in his own pocket, constitutes the bribe.

This is a controversial definition of bribery, and it is unclear whether the DA will be able to make it stick. But whether it involves a criminal act or not, the Gonzales affair illustrates once again the dysfunction in our system, in which elected officials desperately chase private campaign donations and political support. With presidential campaigns costing billions, California gubernatorial races costing tens of millions and big-city mayoral races costing millions, politicians spend most of their time fundraising. Very sophisticated candidates may be able to walk the line between correct and inappropriate relationships, but it is difficult for many elected officials to sort this out. With the present system, it is relatively easy for them to fall into the questionable cultivation of supporters through directing public benefits their way. The root of the political brouhaha in San José is that Gonzales is seen to have been nurturing the Teamsters’ political support through the Norcal contract.

If we want to prevent costly, embarrassing messes like this, which distract government from doing our business, we must eliminate private financing from political campaigns.

Spurred by ongoing scandals nationally and locally, the movement for publicly financed elections is gaining steam around the country. Maine and Arizona now have public financing for statewide offices. As a big state with wealthy interest groups, California is a more daunting challenge. Opposition to the idea will be powerful. And yet the California Nurses Association will have an initiative on the November 2006 ballot to bring a “clean money” public campaign financing system to California.

It may take years to get a public financing law in place in California. But relieving public officials of the burden of private fundraising is crucial for a system in which elected officials clearly represent the public’s interests. Ω

