

The People's Legislature

DORIS "GRANNY D" HADDOCK

"Public Telling"

January 23, 2006

Thank you.

I am so happy that you invited me to come to Wisconsin, the land of Fighting Bob LaFollette and Russ the Rock Feingold. I have wanted to come here anyway to see if I could find a box of Feingold lapel buttons to start spreading around New Hampshire. Oh, if all our elected officials were even a little bit like him!

I think you know that the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute recently asked Wisconsin citizens if they thought their elected officials truly represented them as citizens, or instead represented the special interests, or merely represented their own interests as politicians. Well, some 94 percent believe that their elected officials represent the special interests and themselves, not the voters.

But that leaves six percent who think that their elected officials actually represented them. Now, who are these six-percenters?. Well, you have to take into account that three percent of Wisconsin citizens are millionaires, so they are probably indeed right, they are probably being represented. But that still leaves another three percent who think they are being represented and, not being millionaires, are probably quite mistaken.

There are a number of possible explanations, including mental disorders such as delusions of grandeur that might prompt a few poor souls to strut about thinking that their state senators care ever so much more than a jar of warm you-know-what for their needs and opinions.

And of course there is the criminal element, surely a percent or two, who have a natural sympathy for the politicians and might expect they do represent them in a fashion.

Now if the Institute would conduct a survey of public officials and ask them if they believe that they represent the citizens, the special interests, or themselves, and if they answer according to their true beliefs, I think we would see that a good 94% of them believe that they are working hard and unselfishly for their community. Yes, I believe there would be a rather large difference of opinion between the officials and the citizens.

Why? Certainly we all want to think well of ourselves. We all see ourselves as hard, unselfish workers, building a better tomorrow for our people. If a senator in his Lexus or Mercedes speeds by a homeless family after voting down a budget item for affordable housing, it is not because he is cruel, for he is working for the larger goal of building a prosperous society that encourages people to get to work and take care of their own families, and he is doing that today by helping an oil refinery avoid smokestack regulations. It is not because he doesn't want clean air and water, but because there is a price to pay for jobs and growth, and you have to break some eggs to make that omelet. In fact you may have to allow some mercury into the eggs. The fact that the wealthy elite of the community agree with him and forever finance his reelection is but a happily synchronous fact of life and maybe even a sign from the big CEO in heaven that all's right with the world.

The fact is, meetings with lobbyists at all hours, endless committee hearings listening to whiners from the community, and the non-stop fundraising events make for a tough and thankless life of public service.

Well, it was all interesting and sadly amusing while it lasted, but it's time for we the ungrateful people to put these dedicated martyrs out of their misery. The great middle class was the strong ground that kept America and its communities strong, despite the petty corruptions and lack of true social leadership of its elected officials. But today's widening gap between rich and poor, the loss of our leisure time, the loss of our retirement security, the edge we live on in regard to health care, the fraudulent wars they drag our children to for their own profit, the rapidly deteriorating natural environment that sustains us—are conditions that are no longer bearable by the people. The time has come for a new kind of politics in America, and we had better act while there is still a chance for us.

We need our children and our fellow citizens to be intensively educated on the issues that will inform their service as citizens. Let us make a plan for this that is realistic, long-term, and well-funded.

We need to pull our leaders not from those ego cases and idealogues who present themselves like shiny automobiles for our selection, but instead from gentle, wise, respectful, natural leaders who are educated on the issues and have demonstrated longstanding service to the community—people who listen long and think hard before speaking.

We need to create a system of public financing for our political campaigns, so that real people, smart people, wise people, humble people can be elected to lead us home from this Lord of the Flies island we have got ourselves stuck on.

The politics of our future is not about left and right, or conservative and liberal. It will be between pragmatists and idealogues, and the pragmatists will win after a few more hurricane seasons. Mother Nature has the biggest block of votes in the politics ahead, and she will support leaders who make things work, fix things up, keep people alive and healthy. I do not fear the present order of politics because unsustainable conditions are just that.

It is for each of us to look at the way we are living and to examine the impact we are having upon other people here and around the world, and upon the natural world that provides for us. New, more local systems of jobs, local manufacturing, locally-owned retailing, local food cultivation, better town planning and more natural transportation options must become the norm if we are not to be swept away by history sooner rather than later. Political reform is essential to this, as the present control of our government by wealthy, selfish interests keeps us from correcting our course. What we do to regain control of our local governments, and to put them in step with our wiser values, is the important and meaningful work of our lives. And here we are, digging in!

Any truly significant reform is passed not because it is a good idea, but because a new scandal is distracting politicians from their bribery as usual, and they need to pass a law in order to look earnest, even if it hurts a bit. Reformers must therefore always be at the ready with a nice selection of pistols and hari-kari knives to hand them. The present season of scandals, both in Washington and in statehouses, including Wisconsin's, is not the airing of some unfortunate lapse of ethics by otherwise ethical people, it is merely the case that the elephant that has long been in the room of our democracy has once again released a sudden offense of gas and everyone is concerned to clear the air, but they will be content also to let the elephant remain. And it will all happen again if we do not take this opportunity to coax the beast from the room.

Here is how bad it is. Arizona Congressman J.D. Hayworth, when confronted with his unsavory connection with the Abramoff scandal, stated that Abramoff had nothing to do with his voting record; that he, J.D. Hayworth, as co-chair of the Native American Congressional Caucus, had

sold his votes to the casino interests long before Abramoff ever came along. An innocent man! He didn't use quite those words, but that was the unvarnished content of his remarks. The Abramoff affair is but the odor of the beast; it is not the beast itself. The beast itself thrives on our failure to hold our elected public officials to the same standards we hold our better judges and other people who decide public matters and must not accept things of value from the people they regulate. The massive conflict of interest of our present system is indeed the beast, and we need to do two things if we are to make the necessary change.

First, we must make sure that all legislators, reporters and editorialists understand the proposed public financing system that can take much of the conflict of interest out of our politics, city, state and national. The cost for such programs is about one-tenth of what we pay now for the tax loopholes, environmental loopholes and subsidies passed as payback to wealthy campaign donors—costs we can save when our officials are not beholden to donors. The program works where it is the law, and it can and will work everywhere.

If supplying public funds for campaigns is the financial carrot to help urge the beast from the room, we also need the stick on the other end, and here it is: We must elevate the definition of conflict of interest. It should apply not merely to the money secreted into private pockets, but it should also, in the public mind if not yet in the law, apply to the money that is given to sustain a politician in office. In ballot initiative states, the voters would vote 90% for such an expansion of the conflict of interest laws. In states where reforms must go through the legislature, as in Wisconsin, here is how to do it: Go to legislative hearings. Stand and protest when an official is taking part in a committee hearing on a subject that concerns the very interests who bankroll his or her career. Just stand up and be prepared to get in trouble:

"Point of order, Mr. Chairman. I believe Senator Snort receives major donations from the industry you are proposing to regulate here today. The People's Legislature has asked me to demand that he declare a conflict and recuse himself from all dealings with this matter, as his political career is bankrolled by these same interests. Whether or not he has a legal conflict of interest, he has a clear moral conflict of interest."

Do it once and you will be a crazy fool. Do it constantly and tirelessly, however, with an organized group of die-hards, and you will push the elephant out of the room, and toward public funding. You will succeed because you will be voicing and representing the public's belief that the people we hire should represent only the citizens who elect them and the community at large, and no one or nothing else.

Reform groups too often make a noise from the sidelines and are content to whine-away the years, never really solving the problems that first invigorated them. This tends to only lower public expectations of government, and that lowered expectation plays into the hands of the corrupt. If you are reformers, get the job done or go home. And strike now, while the iron is white hot.

Thank you very much.