

‘HOW CORRUPT ARE OUR POLITICS?’ THE CHALLENGE FOR POLITICAL LEADERS IN QUEENSLAND

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David Cole, in a review of *Corruption in America: From Benjamin Franklin’s Snuff Box to Citizens United*¹ posed the question – ‘**How Corrupt are our Politics?**’²

The book surveys the history of political corruption in America. The author, Zephyr Teachout, is both a political activist and a legal analyst. She argues that corruption is the most pressing threat that our democracy faces and links this threat explicitly to unrestricted campaign spending. In Queensland, and especially in New South Wales, the issue of public declaration of donations and the quantum of campaign spending has been closely linked to corruption.

Teachout provides a working definition of corruption, borrowed from the framers of the US constitution:

Using public office for private ends was essentially the opposite of public virtue, and was therefore a threat to the life and health of the new Republic.

She then discusses the rapid expansion of the role of lobbyists and their inter-penetration of both public bureaucracies and ministerial staff – something well documented in contemporary Queensland in relation to the mining industry.

She perceives lobbying as a threat but at the same time a necessary part of the democratic process:

Information and reason are among the highest values in the liberal tradition and lobbying involved the production and communication of information and reason.

... on the other hand, the social function of lobbying is to take money and turn it into political power.

Clearly the penetration of lobbyists inside the processes of Queensland’s legislative and executive branches of governance has not yet reached the level to which this has taken place within American institutions; nor is our society marked, yet, by the same vast disparities in wealth (though this disparity is increasing rapidly in Australia).

There is a greater presence in Australia of J K Galbraith’s notion of a ‘countervailing power’ in the form of a trade union movement, albeit with a declining membership. (Cole notes that the political network of the shadowy US Koch brothers spent \$400 million during the 2012 campaign in the US, which was double the combined spending of the ten largest labour unions).

¹ Zephyr Teachout, *Corruption in America: From Benjamin Franklin’s Snuff Box to Citizens United*, Harvard University Press, 2014.

² David Cole, ‘How Corrupt are our Politics?’, *New York Review of Books*, (25.9.14).

But 'big business' even in Queensland is increasingly controlled by international rather than national governance structures. Lobbying strategies are often modelled on American practice, like so much else in Australian society.

The moral challenge for political leaders in Queensland is to ensure that the system is not perceived as an oligarchy dominated by the interests of those with enough money to ensure privileged outcomes. It is clear that the federal government made a fundamental error with its introduction of budget measures that were instantly, and widely, condemned as unfair.

In the election on 31 January the electors in Queensland – especially in the electorate of Premier Newman where \$18m has been offered in pork barrel inducements to vote LNP³ – will be invited to contemplate the role of money, lobbyists and the link between party donations and public policies.

³ If fairness was a criterion, should each of the 89 electorates be offered a similar inducement? 'It's called the Ashgrove Plan and it's \$18 million designed to keep the seat yellow and blue': <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/queensland-state-election-2015/queensland-election-ashgrove-plan-gets-18-million-20150111-12lylr.html>