

Buying favors: A new Boston Tea Party

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When a spiritual revival broke out at an evangelical college a few years ago, one faculty member was reported as saying that it would be wise to wait 25 years before assessing whether anything significant had happened. Such reservations are appropriate regarding the current fervor for political reform in Washington. Most members of Congress are endorsing reform after superlobbyist Jack Abramoff confessed to fraud and conspiracy and agreed to cooperate with an investigation into the unholy financial alliance between politicians and lobbyists. But the politicians are also running for cover, and the reforms they come up with may well put other loopholes in the system.

Because the Congress is controlled by Republicans, and it is mostly Republicans who benefited from Abramoff's largesse, the scandal seems to be mostly a Republican one. But Democrats too have been in on the pay-to-play scheme. Some of them received gifts from Abramoff, and when theirs was the majority party they had their own special relationship with the K Street lobbyists. The too-cozy relationship between politicians and lobbyists or other moneyed special-interest groups is a bipartisan problem that can only be fixed by bipartisan efforts.

Politicians listen to rich and powerful lobbyists. But who speaks for the poor and the powerless? Michael Crowley, who writes for the *New Republic*, observes: "In times like these when we have a budget crunch, it's not subsidies for corporations or tax loopholes that go; it's Medicaid . . . and health care for the low-income disadvantaged people who don't really have lobbies in Washington with the clout equivalent of some of American's biggest corporations."

If there is to be meaningful change, Congress will have to do more than ban lobbyist-paid travel and entertainment. Jeffrey H. Birnbaum of the *Washington Post* suggests that lobbyists be banned entirely from raising money for politicians. An alternative would be to require lobbyists to report on all fund-raising events for

politicians, noting the amounts spent. “Earmarking” must also be challenged—it’s the practice whereby powerful forces can persuade members of the Appropriations Committee to add items to a spending bill that are not disclosed until after a bill is passed. Now is also an opportune time to resurrect the proposal that all federal political campaigns be publicly funded.

Significant change will not happen unless people outside the D.C. Beltway become exercised over this scandal. Something like the Boston Tea Party is needed. In colonial days the complaint was about taxation without representation. Now we have formal representation, but the big-money lobbyists and special interests have more substantive representation than ordinary people. What needs dumping this time around is not a commodity, but those in office who have made exchanging legislative favors for money a way of life.