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## **No Fun in Dysfunctional Government**

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I don't know about you, but I'm not really impressed with how our government is working. And I'm talking about not just substance here, but process -- though certainly the two are connected.

What's happening right now in state government? Well, we're in the process of supposedly reconciling two radically different amendments to the governor's budget proposal, one from the Assembly and one from the Senate. Then we'll send them back to the governor, who violently disagrees with them both. This after several months of discussion, with most of the public not having a clue about the details. And it involves things of considerable importance -- the state's fiscal stability, the fate of our cities, spending priorities on prisons vs. schools, environment vs. sprawl and housing segregation -- on which none of the different pieces of paper has much of anything useful to say.

This is no way to run a great state. In fact, it's sort of stupid. Everyone has their theory of how our government got so stupid. My favorite is that Tommy Thompson's promiscuous use of the partial veto got the Legislature in the habit of not thinking, and also accepting a narrower and narrower set of arenas -- at this point, basically, the machinations of the Joint Finance Committee -- to do the public's business.

And with politics ever more an inside game, the power of insiders has naturally grown. That means big contributors, in our broken system of electing people to government. It didn't help that, as a more general matter, our politics became increasingly capital-intensive -- more and more driven by TV and polling, less and less by people.

In combination, the peculiar combination of excessive gubernatorial power, insider legislative politics and "modern" campaign techniques has combusted to mean that money now rules this state's politics more than at any time in its history.

You see the results directly in the budget proposals just passed. Who got gored and who got spared is something you could have predicted, with almost sickening precision, directly off campaign contributions.

There seems to be growing bipartisan agreement on this corruption, and how it has made our government a joke. Consider two recent comments on our process -- one from a Democrat from a big city, the other from a senior Republican from a small city.

Sen. Gary George, D-Milwaukee: "We're just posturing. The Senate and the Assembly are ships passing in the night. The system is dysfunctional. We have a lot of special interests paying protection money. They're interested in contributing so nothing bad happens to them."

Sen. Mike Ellis, R-Neenah: "We've got huge deficits because Democrats and Republicans can't make any adjustments in the expenditures of their core constituencies who bankroll their elections."

Can you really disagree with either one?

Just to make matters worse, the current leadership in the governor's office shows absolutely no sign of wanting to improve this disgusting state of affairs. Gov. Scott McCallum's latest is a promise to veto Ellis' proposal for campaign finance reform -- finally passed, after much obnoxious delay, by the Democratic Senate. This is a good law, and it certainly is Wisconsin's best shot at serious reform in a generation. It would have done wonders to rejuvenate and clean up our politics. But apparently, only over this governor's dead body.

Said McCallum: "I believe all ideas must be on the table with one exception: The state should not use taxpayer dollars to fund campaigns."

In straight talk, in case you didn't catch his meaning: "I will consider almost any wacky proposal to temporarily balance our books, even if it means selling off public health assets, clubbing our cities, wrecking more of our environment, and ensuring rising inequality in the state. But one thing I will not do is remove the power of big money in politics. I depend on that money, as do my political buddies. It has served me well, and them. I hope it, and they, can even buy me the next election. In any case, I won't let anybody take this toy away from me. No no no no! And I promise to use my mighty veto pen to make sure that nobody does."

\* You call this sensible debate? Measured democratic deliberation about government "of the people, by the people, for the people"? Not really. We're so far from that now, it seems like a distant dream.

What a disgrace our government has become. Really, it could break your heart.

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