

Politics and Corruption have Deep Roots

Jerry Krase (September 24, 2008)



When a New York City Assemblyman is indicted for "Putting his Office Up for Sale" we should explore the roots of the problem and its solution.

While the world ponders the melt down of Wall Street due to the loss (theft) of hundreds of billions of dollars of public and private funds due to the lax oversight, if not collusion and cooperation, of elected and appointed Federal government officials we shall turn our gaze to the sad case of ex-NYC Corrections Officer, and 30 years incumbent, New York State Assemblyman, Anthony S. Seminerio, who was recently arrested on "corruption" charges.

Both these alleged grander and more petite larcenies are just the most recent incarnations of an American tradition of mixing business and politics. Today's Big Crooks are only a slightly more evolved species of the 1990 "Keating Five" Savings and Loan and Enron thugs.

Seminerio's woes remind me of the time in 1987 when ex-NYC Police Officer and Bronx Congressman



Mario Biaggi along with the ex-Brooklyn Democratic Party “Boss” Meade H. Esposito, were indicted on Federal charges of bribery, fraud and conspiracy for trying to “help” a financially troubled Brooklyn Navy Yard company. Clearly big-time-politicians-for-hire have evolved since the 1920s Teapot Dome Scandal. At the street level, in the “good old days” the small-time grifters simply put their hand out in one way or another, or merely dropped a hint, but a recent 17-page criminal complaint accuses Seminerio of actually establishing a consulting firm, Marc Consultants, to collect fees for his legislative favors. It seems he got the idea from “two senators”, indicating that the “innovation” is probably more wide spread.

The complaint presented in Manhattan’s US District Court alleges that for seven years starting in 2000 Seminerio fraudulently accepted more than \$500,000 from those doing business with the state in connection with “the performance of his official duties as a member of the Assembly.” In what sounds to me like “political business as usual” US Attorney Michael J. Garcia, said that Seminerio “put his office up for sale for those willing to pay the right price.” Providing us with even less confidence in “government oversight” to protect us from ourselves, Garcia also noted that the state’s lax disclosure laws allowed Seminerio (and therefore his colleagues) “to conceal his stream of corrupt payments.” According to Benjamin Wieser and Danny Hakim in The New York Times, “Seminerio has been one of the more socially conservative members of the left-leaning Assembly Democratic caucus, opposing most of his colleagues on issues like gay marriage. “ They also wrote that “the indictment says that Seminerio, “... received a call from an executive of the hospital that depended on state funding, who complained that the Assembly’s budget bill was ‘not good for us.’ The executive wanted Mr. Seminerio to talk to an Assembly committee chairman. ‘I can get anybody you want,’ Mr. Seminerio is quoted as saying. The document also states that he said: ‘I am at your disposal. You tell me what you want,’ adding, ‘I’ll take care of you.’ About a month later, Mr. Seminerio phoned another executive at the hospital, saying he was calling ‘for my check.’ He also said he could walk into the office of an unnamed legislative leader in Albany. ‘That kind of relationship you can’t buy for \$1 million,’ he said, according to the complaint.”

The Assemblyman was also quoted as saying he would lose about sixty percent of his consulting business if he wasn’t re-elected. What do the Big Crooks and the Little Crooks have in common? As an occasional sociologist, and frequent social and political activist I might have a bit of insight in the regard. What I have observed and read over the decades is that for far too many wannabees and incumbents, politics is a business. At times it appears that everything from judicial appointments to contracts for food concessions are up for sale from the municipal to the Federal level. This is an expected, even greedily anticipated, consequence of the growth of government. In this regard Conservatives are right; Big Government produces Big Crooks, but it is no accident. Big Government doesn’t have to also be dishonest government and smallness is no guarantee of honesty. The more government does, the more it becomes a target of both honest and dishonest interests. Complex regulations virtually require lobbyists and enhance the opportunity for corruption. The best check on government is Citizen Oversight, that is; intensive political education which leads to informed choices, of which voting is one type. Returning to the story of Meade and Mario. It seems that their indictments resulted in part from investigations by a Federal Strike Force into Brooklyn organized-crime activities. They were looking into claims that Democratic Party judgeship nominations were purchased and that payments were made to fix civil cases in Brooklyn. Information in the indictment suggested that F.B.I. agents had monitored telephone conversations between Esposito and Biaggi. At that time, my friends in the courts and I all seemed to know not to conduct business on the phone. Evidently Mario and Meade didn’t get the message, and it seems, neither did Anthony. I should note that in 2007 African American Brooklyn Democratic Party Boss Clarence Norman Jr. was sentenced to 1-3 years for extorting money from judicial candidates, so it’s not just an Italian thing.

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