

B 4. HOW TO IMPROVE DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENTS

Some are better than others, but all can be improved,
and all need to be improved in the public interest.

1. IN THE FINANCING OF ELECTIONS

Clearly we need to eliminate insofar as possible the too great influence of special interest money in financing any and all elections. To date, the only related laws are quite inadequate. The problem is two-fold: four highly used conduits for special interest money (so-called soft money for "party-building", "issue ads", PACs, and bundling) each have some valid public interest uses, and tight regulation has been treated as a violation of free speech. With respect to the latter, it is obvious that the democratic process is subverted when those with access to wealth can vastly out-purchase any others' access to or "speech" through any mass media or electioneering medium and thus "out-speak and out-influence" others seeking public support. That is not truly free speech, it is an undemocratic denial of equally free speech (in both elections and in seeking public support on legislation). The only question is how to prevent it in the public interest.

Reasonable and equal absolute limits on total spending for each candidate (or advocacy of any legislation widely debated publicly) could by law be set by government election commissions and allocated by each candidate (or legislative originator for legislation).

Finally, there must be a certain and equal amount of free time provided by the mass media to each candidate to adequately make his or her case for election, else the media are unwarrantedly profiting from performing a necessary public function which requires the use of media (the rights to use which were usually free to the owners in the beginning).

2. IN THE CONDUCT OF ELECTIONS

The public is not now being well informed about the issues by the mass media, sometimes actually being misinformed by simply reporting what the candidates are saying, and most of the time merely reporting guesses about who is ahead or gaining. Candidates use every appeal, rational or irrational, that they think will win votes. Popularity and name recognition count far too much, qualifications almost none. When there are debates they seldom help, because managers often do not permit their side to be forced to resolve any important issue. Besides, debating is an intellectually dishonest game--each side selects only the facts and the arguments that are thought to strengthen their side and ignores everything to the contrary. That only confuses listeners who should realize that neither is taking into account everything

relevant to an issue and hence neither is reaching a well balanced conclusion. Barbara Tannen's book, "THE ARGUMENT CULTURE" gives a well balanced discussion of how our whole culture is focusing on who is winning what contest and hence if failing to dialog and discuss issues and to seek consensus and to seek to clarify sound reasons for remaining differences of opinion.

Usually candidates exaggerate differences, as when one claims to be for freedom, as though the other candidate was really against it just because he claims something requires some regulation--which does not deny people proper freedoms at all. Usually both agree on most fundamentals and differ only on how much farther the law should go in some limited respect.

But some dirty tricks need to be prevented. The commission for each set of elections should have the power to prevent any candidate from making charges too late in a campaign for opponents to answer adequately. Whenever a candidate criticizes the stand taken by an opponent, the one criticizing must be required to state what he or she would do instead.

The problem is to give the public more clarity as to the real issues involved, and what information is relevant to help people decide what they think would be best under the circumstances. There will usually be room to differ.

3. IN THE PROCESS OF LEGISLATING

Congressional rules permit several practices that are completely undemocratic and that cause endless trouble. There should be a mass citizen movement to force proper changes in Congressional rules to end those practices. State and local legislative bodies also need to be scrutinized and inappropriate practices prevented.

1. The filibuster

This enables a single senator to defeat the will of a majority. Once a senator has had ample chance to present his view on a bill and to engage in proper debate with others over it, the senator should remain silent on the matter. Filibuster and obvious prolonging of action after issues have been aired should be absolutely prohibited and a vote taken. Upon appeal after the vote, a senator can be given an additional hour to argue his case if he has something different to say, and then a second binding vote taken when at least as many members of the chamber are present as before.

2. Committee chairperson's power is excessive

Evidently the committee chair can even refuse to hold hearings on a bill. There should be ample opportunity for open hearings on any bill subject to the committee's jurisdiction. The chair can block opposition to the chair's view on an issue. It appears as though the committee chair's view on any matter before the committee is almost never overruled even though a majority of the

committee could overrule the chair and present a majority report of the committee that the chair would prefer to block.

3. Irrelevant riders on bills

A bill on any subject can have attached to it irrelevant riders on different subjects in the hope that they can sneak by since the majority will support the bill. If it is not an amendment, no separate vote is required on adding the rider.

4. Absence of hearings on riders

Riders are attached to bills without having separate hearings on the riders.

5. Riders attached late

Riders are attached to bills so late in the process that many members are unaware that riders have been attached to which they might object.

6. A single legislator can for a time hold up the execution of a law passed by a majority.

4. IN REGULATING ECONOMIC ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Often Congress does not adequately finance the administration of laws it has passed. Remedy: public pressure. Sometimes Presidents deliberately appoint people opposed to a law to head the agency supposed to enforce it. Remedy: Congress refuse approval and require or make satisfactory appointee. Often the agency, which does have to develop competence in the area they are dealing with, become captives of the special interests who dominate the field being regulated. The regulated then regulate the presumed regulators. Remedy: A good watchdog. And too often people are appointed to regulate from the industries to be regulated, or, after being a regulator they are given a nice position within the industry regulated. The prospect of such position has a bad effect on how much regulating a person does. Remedy: Prevent the former, and a 20 year wait for the latter.

5. IN TAXING EQUITABLY

The total tax system needs to be progressive, not simply the income tax. As MN Representative Sabo proposes, corporate management incomes above 25 times the average employee income of the firm should not be treated as a business cost. Capital gains should be taxed much more highly than personal income, except where it can be proven that all the gains involve increased investments that actually increase employment substantially. Steep inheritance taxes should be maintained and relaxed only in case of farms and small businesses operated by someone inheriting them. State and local taxes should also generally be progressive, but there is a place in the system for property taxation based on the benefit principle (to finance police & fire protection). Schools should be finance by income tax, not property tax.

6. IN PROVIDING ADEQUATE SOCIAL INSURANCE

Life is full of economic insecurities. Some can be insured against if one can afford the insurance. But insurance companies can fail if not reinsured & regulated by government. Only the very wealthy can save enough to be protected against disasters that hit a few unexpectedly. Social insurance can relatively inexpensively protect all against such as well as against old age financial needs more equitably than can private pensions. Social insurance should include medical insurance, but the attempt to reform the present wholly inadequate U.S. private medical insurance system failed after the press simply reported political attacks instead of clarifying the real issues and analyzing misrepresentations of them.

7. IN DEALING PROPERLY WITH PERSISTENT SOCIAL PROBLEMS

The social problems that persist do so because they can not be handled adequately by private efforts alone. Government money will be needed even to hire the expertise required and to train those needing more training and to provide transfer payments to those in poverty who cannot or should not hold jobs etc. It is clear that no problems are solved simply by throwing more money at them, as the conservatives love to say, but of course they do not want to spend any money on them, and the fact of the matter is that most social problems cannot be dealt with without throwing more money and expertise at them than we have in the past. Clearly this is not the place where I can list all social problems and talk about each, although I do from time to time teach a course on socio-economic problems. It does require separate study of each problem, trying to learn everything relevant, and considering what combinations of tactics seems most likely to deal effectively with them, learning as we proceed to try to deal well.

8. IN FINANCING SCHOOLING ADEQUATELY

The slogan "leave no child behind" is a wonderful slogan. One could only wish that those who use it, as well as all the rest of us, would do whatever that requires. Certainly it requires making Headstart available to all who want or need it, and improving public schooling in every way possible. It will at a start be necessary to prevent schools in poor areas from falling into disrepair and otherwise funding schooling in such areas very much better than presently. Everything will cost money. We need not only to learn how to insure that every child in this country masters the 3Rs well enough, but that all have enough knowledge of how to be a good citizen, all get enough training to find some job that they can find interesting, and all learn how to enrich their lives in the years ahead of them. We are not yet doing well enough in any of those respects, but it is not because we do not have any idea of how we

might do better in each.

9. IN ALLOCATING EXPENDITURES WISELY

In principle, government should do only what needs to be done but cannot be done otherwise or cannot be done as well otherwise. That principle will itself determine that substantial funds will be needed for some things already mentioned above. Economists think they have given enough guidance to wise allocation by saying that we ought to try to equalize the marginal productivity of each dollar in each proper line of expenditure. That says nothing about how to measure marginal productivity, so it leaves out the most important part of the task. The answer cannot be found in dollar measures. Some of the most important directions in which money needs to be spent yield no direct monetary returns to anyone. The problem is to make judgments of relative values with respect to which there would be a general consensus among well informed people.