

## Our Opinion: Enough ethics rhetoric, sign the bill

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RHETORICALLY SPEAKING, Gov. Rod Blagojevich has been all over ethics reform.

In 2003, he spoke of “revolutionary ethics reform” as he and the legislature debated what eventually became the Illinois Ethics Act. In 2005, he promised to “rock the system” by reforming the political fundraising system in Illinois.

Yet now that he has a chance to get things rocking, we’re getting more rhetoric instead.

A BILL that would prohibit anyone with a state contract worth \$50,000 or more from contributing to the officeholder who awarded the contract received unanimous approval from the General Assembly. Yet it sits, unsigned, on the governor’s desk because Blagojevich says it’s insufficient.

This week, the political watchdog group Illinois Campaign for Political Reform found that \$238,500 that the governor’s political campaign has raised in the first half of 2008 would have been barred under the rules of the new ethics bill, House Bill 824. By contrast, Blagojevich’s fellow state constitutional officers already have voluntarily implemented rules that prohibit accepting political donations from contractors doing business with their offices.

IN ESSENCE, Blagojevich is saying he won’t sign a law that will apply only to his office because it’s not strong enough. That logic rocks our system, though not in the way Blagojevich has promised.

If Blagojevich were serious about ridding Illinois government of “pay-to-play” contracting — or even the appearance of it — he would have voluntarily stopped taking donations from contract-holders long ago. That would have meant his campaign would be \$238,500 lighter this year, but it also would have demonstrated real resolve to end pay-to-play.

And there is absolutely nothing that would stop Blagojevich from signing this bill, then working with the General Assembly later to add more reforms.

Ethics legislation is an ever-evolving beast. There is no single, perfect ethics bill that will stand for decades unchanged. And to be successful, ethics legislation must come from collaboration, not from one person or entity dictating what the laws should say. The Blagojevich administration’s perpetual demand for the perfect has set up obstacles for what would be solid reform.

MORE IMPORTANTLY, Blagojevich needs to realize that this is not about merely putting another law into the state statutes.

It’s really about changing the culture in state government.

Those responsible for awarding contracts shouldn’t avoid rewarding their biggest political donors just because a law says they must. They should want to avoid even the appearance of pay-to-play politics.

That cultural change already has happened with the attorney general, secretary of state, treasurer, comptroller and lieutenant governor. They didn’t need HB 824 to force them.

The governor shouldn’t either, but signing this bill sure would be a strong indication that he embraces the cultural change it represents. (An even stronger gesture would be his return of that \$238,000, but a simple signature will suffice.)

And if he thinks the rules should be stronger, we’ll welcome a new bill next spring with additional constraints.

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