



Political Careerists Threaten Freedom, Prosperity

By Jack McHugh

Summary

Career politicians serve the system, not the people, and pose a threat the future of our state and nation.

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The vast majority of elected officials in Michigan are “political careerists.” In its purest form, this is defined as someone with the ambition of using politics to escape the hard accountability of the private sector for the rest of his or her working life.

For the political careerists who run our state, school and local government establishments, there is a well understood model for how to achieve this goal, captured in this one-sentence piece of unspoken-advice:

“If you serve the political system ahead of the people, it will provide extensive rewards and benefits, your public career will prosper, and no one will tell the folks back home.”

To be fair, in the worldview of political careerists, most of the time “serving the political system” to them means the same thing as “serving the people,” although occasionally rationalizations are needed that even members of this class realize are a stretch. But with rare exceptions, their behavior is not the product of self-conscious, cynical manipulation in the manner of Hollywood “bad guy” politicians.

Successful political careerists are almost always “nice guys.” But none of this changes the fact that our state’s largest problems are arguably the product of a lot of very nice-guy political careerists engaging in system-serving behavior that’s had hugely destructive social and economic consequences.

What exactly does “serving the system” mean, and why do they do it? Simply put, the most reliable way to advance from the lowest political positions to the Legislature and beyond is to never upset any of the politically powerful special interests that benefit from the status quo. Play along by not seriously upsetting any of these interests’ apple carts, and they will be “enablers” for your political advancement.

These particular interests include, but are not limited to:

- Government employees and their unions
- The union-dominated public school establishment
- Local government officials and financiers (bond brokers)
- Corporate welfare beneficiaries
- Anti-growth environmentalists and their allies in the state bureaucracy

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- Monopolist utility companies and our state's non-profit health insurer (Blue Cross Blue Shield)
- Professional welfare advocates including large foundations and senior citizen lobbyists (AARP)
- The dozen or so large industrial firms that pay no Michigan Business Tax because of its credits against local capital equipment property taxes
- Other narrow but politically influential interests
- "Iron triangle" combinations, such as anti-growth environmentalists, subsidy-seeking "green energy" businesses and monopolistic utility companies

Understanding these political dynamics explains many otherwise puzzling things. For example, during the past decade people have scratched their heads over the unwillingness of Michigan's political establishment to adopt measures everyone knows are necessary to turn this state around. But fixing our problems requires these careerists to take actions contrary to the system-serving behaviors on which their careers have been built.

Something else that perplexes regular people is why "straight talk" seems so hard for politicians, and why they can't seem to avoid posturing, evasions, half-truths and "spin." The system-serving dynamic also provides an answer here, which has two parts.

The first is that the concentrated benefits politicians provide to a politically powerful special interest always impose dispersed costs on taxpayers in general. Hiding this requires "spin," and telling different things to different audiences. For example, most grass-roots Republican voters would be shocked at many things their "conservative" representatives say in Lansing to government employee union lobbyists.

The second part of the answer is the extent to which the public does not share the political careerists' worldview that "serving the system" is the same as "serving the people." When a politician tells a constituent who's complaining about a complicated vote, "You don't understand," more often than not this is the product of clashing worldviews.

In fact, politicians have always "served the system," often at the expense of the people. What's different today is how Big Government, a monstrosity expanded welfare/regulatory/crony-capitalism state, has intruded politics into virtually every area of life, and consumes ever more of our incomes. It is this reality that has converted serving the political system ahead of the people from an obnoxious irritant into a dynamic that threatens our future liberty and prosperity.

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