

Dan Walters Capitol has a virus that sometimes flares into disease

By [Dan Walters](#)
dwalters@sacbee.com

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When the initial shock of last week's corruption and gunrunning charges against state Sen. Leland Yee wore off a bit, politicians and pundits began talking and writing about the larger meaning, if any – especially since Yee is the third Democratic senator this year to face criminal charges.

“Is Sacramento rotten to the core?” is the headline over an article by Bill Whalen, a former gubernatorial speechwriter now associated with Stanford University's Hoover Institution.

Whalen suggested a blue-ribbon commission “to investigate how politics are conducted in California's capital.”

Whalen was not alone in pondering a greater meaning.

Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg had treated the cases of Sens. Rod Wright and Ron Calderon gingerly, allowing them to take voluntary leaves of absence. And when the Yee case broke on Wednesday, Steinberg depicted the three cases as coincidental anomalies, which is probably true.

“I know what people are thinking,” Steinberg said. “This is the third incident the Senate has had to deal with. We are going to do everything in our power to uphold the integrity of the Senate and do the people's business and still have a great and productive year.”

But on Friday, Steinberg changed his tune a bit: “One is an anomaly, two is a coincidence. Three? That's not what this Senate is about.”

He urged formal suspension of all three, pledged intensive ethics training for senators and staffers, and said he wanted the latter to report bosses' bad conduct.

So is the Capitol, as Whalen and others suggest, “rotten to the core?”

No, but it has a systemic virus that occasionally flares into full-blown flesh-eating disease.

Politicians' decisions have immense financial consequences. Thousands of interests employ hundreds of lobbyists, pay for gifts and entertainment, and make very hefty campaign contributions to affect outcomes.

Politicians are aware of their acts' financial impacts and see nothing wrong with seeking relatively tiny bits for their campaigns.

It's pay-to-play, and it's legal as long as there's no explicit quid pro quo. But it's a very fine line, and some stray over it.

Would public campaign financing be better? Stakeholders would still seek to influence outcomes, and closing off campaign funds would merely drive the process underground.

We've already seen how one supposed reform – limiting direct contributions – has sparked “independent expenditures” that are more difficult to trace.

A better approach might be unlimited direct contributions, but with stricter reporting requirements and very severe penalties.

And we should not depend on the feds. The Legislature should enforce ethics more aggressively, and state and local prosecutors should have vigorous, independent public integrity units to sniff out overt corruption.

*Call The Bee's Dan Walters, (916) 321-1195. Back columns, www.sacbee.com/walters.
Follow him on Twitter @WaltersBee*