Commentary: Public Corruption, Personal Scandal

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Political observers are shocked at the rapidity at which members of the General Assembly have been charged with a variety of legal infractions. The immediate, knee-jerk response has been to view these infractions as typical behavior of politicians. On closer inspection, however, these allegations are, with some exception, substantively different from the types of misbehavior normally associated with politics.

Historically, misbehavior among politicians was largely connected to official corruption, that is violations of law related to office holding. For example, during the 1970s more than 360 Pennsylvania public and party officials were indicted, convicted, or resigned from office because they were engaged in some type of public corruption. Seven of these officials were members of the General Assembly. Official corruption and private financial gain were common threads linking these acts together. Kickbacks, fraud, macing, bribery, job selling, and income tax evasions were common charges.

No such consistent elements make up the allegations currently being leveled at members of the legislature. True, one legislator has been charged with extortion and filing false tax returns and another has been convicted of perjury in connection with a charge he violated a federal finance law. These are arguably acts of official corruption.

More to the point, however, is the number of legislators whose actions are more closely identified with the pathologies of the 1990s. Slapping one’s girlfriend, alcohol abuse, mysticism and personality disintegration, and vehicular tragedy, the reasons behind the difficulties of current legislators, are not rooted in the political system. They are personal behavioral manifestations that mirror those of many in society.

Too many will conclude that the situation in the legislature reflects directly on that body as an institution or as another indication of the failure of our political system. That is an erroneous conclusion. To be sure, public dismay and disgust at the transgressions of elected officials is appropriate. But it is also important -- even urgent -- for the press and the public to understand that these scandals are different than political scandals of the past. Collectively, they do not stem from a corrupt political system nor do they point to systematic problems in the institutions of representative government.

This is far different stuff than in the “bad old days” in Pennsylvania politics when bribery, macing, stealing, and fraud were common place and leading politicians were famous for inventing new and clever ways to break the law and corrupt the system. Today’s offenses certainly affect the political system. For example, they further undermine public trust in government -- and they could alter the balance of power in state government. But they are not caused by the political system. Their causes lie elsewhere, largely in the personal and idiosyncratic characteristics of those implicated.

Three provisional conclusions can be drawn from the current political scandals.
First, the political system itself, the institutions of representative government and the political parties, are not in the main likely either to be the cause or the locus of future political scandal. Our political institutions are not perfect, but reforms of the past 25 years in combination with some sweeping social changes have reduced the chances of traditional political corruption.

Second, future political scandals will more likely consist of personal failings and individual acts unrelated, or only peripherally related, to the holding of official position. As our political institutions become increasingly diverse in terms of who serves, they will become more a reflection of our entire society --with its strengths as well as its foibles.

Finally, we are all challenged to think in new ways about the causes and effects of public scandal. Public confidence in our political institutions is already weak, voter turnout is near historically low levels, and cynicism about government and politics is widespread. Political scandal exacerbates these trends and further undermines public trust in government. Perhaps it should not. Our institutions are not the source of the problem here. We are.

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