

Ethically Challenged by Dan Jacoby

Eliot Spitzer swept into the Governor's mansion last November promising to clean up Albany the way he cleaned up Wall Street. Given that reform is a slow, laborious process, and that he faces what is generally known as the most dysfunctional legislative body in the country, he probably deserves praise for getting anything done. Unfortunately, the "ethics" bill recently passed by the Assembly (A.3736) can best be described as rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

Oh, there are a few things in the bill that good government groups have been asking for. But they have no real effect on the legislators themselves, so they are, for all practical purposes, worthless. In addition, this bill may take one giant step backward from the need to enforce ethics laws.

The main "reform" in this misbegotten bill bans virtually all gifts to lawmakers from lobbyists. Big deal! Lobbyists were already severely limited, and without serious campaign finance reform lobbyists will just go on directing their bribes (excuse me, "gifts" – or rather, "donations") to the lawmakers' campaign committees.

Honoraria are also prohibited under this bill. Again, who cares? As long as lawmakers can make far more money at their "other" jobs than they make as legislators (being a state legislator is still a "part-time job"), outside groups will still funnel all the money they can directly to those who make our laws and spend our tax money.

Meanwhile, lawmakers will continue to get away with breaking all the rules, since the committee that oversees them (and has never punished anyone for anything) will remain exactly the same.

Then there's the giant step backward – the merger of two watchdog groups into one. Apparently, the more active of the two will end up the "junior partner" in this merger, freeing the most crooked of lobbyists from the consequences of their actions.

There was one attempt to pass something that might have made a difference, however small. Assembly Republicans tried to insert a provision that would deprive convicted felons of their pensions. Unfortunately, the majority voted that down, leading one to wonder just how many potential felons are sitting in the state Assembly.

What's worse, after the Senate passes the same legislation (and they almost certainly will, since Majority Leader Joseph Bruno is the prime sponsor) all the elected officials will tout their "ethics reform" as if they had actually accomplished something. This will most likely kill real reform for the next few years – at least.

So remember, when they hold the big press conference, probably at the bill signing, all that back patting you'll see will amount to nothing more than legislative masturbation. And while that activity is going on (and it is as disgusting as it sounds), "We the People" will be the ones getting truly screwed.