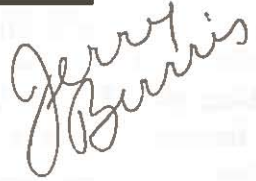


CHAPTER 40

CRONYISM

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“Has Hawai‘i been hurt by cronyism in government?”

A lot of folks believe so. They see Island politics (which means, mostly, Democratic politics) as an inbred playground for cronies, who only talk to and care about fellow insiders. Fresh blood and new ideas are kept out; goodies and the spoils of political domination are hoarded among themselves. Consider, for example, a few recent stories:

- A rogue head of the Office of Environmental Quality Control hands out contract after contract to friends without regard to bidding and apparently even without much concern about whether the work had any value.

- A former legislator and deputy comptroller sidesteps the competitive bidding process by parceling government purchases to friends.

- A rush order for new computers is handed to the budget director’s golf buddy on orders from the budget director himself.

- The governor nominates a close political associate (and, incidentally, wife of the outgoing attorney general) for a seat on the Hawai‘i Supreme Court.

Public gags. The public truly howled on the last one, and even the normally docile State Senate revolted, surprising itself by rejecting the nomination of youthful attorney Sharon Himeno. The rejection was not centered on Himeno’s political philosophy, legal qualifications, or even allegations of conflicts of interest. It was a gag reflex by voters and lawmakers who had simply had it up to here with what they perceived

to be arrogant cronyism by an entrenched political elite.

If the fuss had been made simply by the traditional complainers (Republicans, newcomers, and so forth), it might have been dismissed as business as usual. But it wasn't. A well-attended town meeting in Manoa, for example, erupted into a long, loud, and 100 percent negative discussion when the Himeno nomination was raised. "Real people" of all races, many of whom had been born and raised in Hawai'i and had thought they had "seen it all," were outraged.

Insiders complain. State Senator Mike McCartney talks about a "Mega Club," a nexus involving the political parties, powerful unions, big banks, land trusts, and major downtown firms that cough up the money to keep the Club in political tune. The Mega Club runs things nowadays, McCartney says. It's another way to describe "the old boy network" in which it no longer matters what you know—"it's who you know." In short, cronyism.

McCartney's plaint is striking. Yet look at *his* background: teacher, negotiator for the teachers union, and now lawmaker. His mentor, Charles Toguchi, had gone from teaching to the union to the legislature on his way to being superintendent of the State Department of Education. Interestingly, understudy McCartney has followed the same route, including service as chairman of the Senate Education Committee. In short, the politically privileged McCartney looks as much a product of the crony system as he is a frustrated victim. Interesting.

Beyond politics. What we call cronyism actually goes beyond politics. People in Hawai'i (like people in other insular places) tend to deal with each other based on past associations, kinship, and shared experience. To an outsider, this looks like cronyism and it's bad. To an insider, it's *ohana* and it's perfectly natural. Why wouldn't you tend to favor old buddies from school or the war years? What, you're going to treat your auntie's son-in-law like a stranger?

Imagine the frustration of a newcomer to the Islands trying to get his car fixed at the local garage. He's impatient, anxious, and not even sure what kind of communication he has established with the local service station owner. Then in drives the owner's high school buddy. "Howzits" are exchanged and immediately they're cooking on the same wave length. The newcomer, not even sure what is being said, drives off steaming. You can't get anything done around here unless you went to

high school with someone and speak pidgin, he mutters to himself.

Not true. But it helps, whether it involves getting a car repaired, successfully arguing a case before a local jury, or getting an important piece of business rushed through government bureaucracy. In each case our newcomer is likely to experience, not hostility toward himself or even his impatient ways, but a level of comfort and understanding between people who may have known each other a long time and who, in any event, share a common culture, a common experience. Right on, bruddah.

But should government work this way?

Unequal opportunities. We all pay our taxes and are entitled to equal opportunities, equal treatment. That's why Gavan Daws and George Cooper's *Land and Power in Hawai'i* created such a stir. That book documented how the Democratic powers who came to run politics in Hawai'i during the post-statehood years also became prime winners in the land boom that followed. Time and again, those who had political connections were shown to benefit from the development that government encouraged and controlled. The closer one was to the system, the better one did at all this. It was a crony network that paid off handsomely to its members.

It was also a crony system that "worked," politically, because for a rare moment the interests of the "good old boys" (economic growth, broadened social opportunities, development) coincided with the interests of a broad majority of the people. And the dominant Democrats were able to articulate those interests in a way that appealed to the voters.

In the late 1970s, a group attempted to forge a new coalition of idealistic "local" activists who would see to it that the social gains and special nature of Hawaiian society would not be lost to haole or outside influences: "Let's accept what's good from the rest of the United States (and indeed the Pacific Rim) but not apologize for, or lose, what is special about our own way of doing things." It was called Palaka Power, and its credo *sounds* pretty good, even today. But most observers believe Palaka Power became just another wheel of cronies, in power and in politics, to serve themselves and each other.

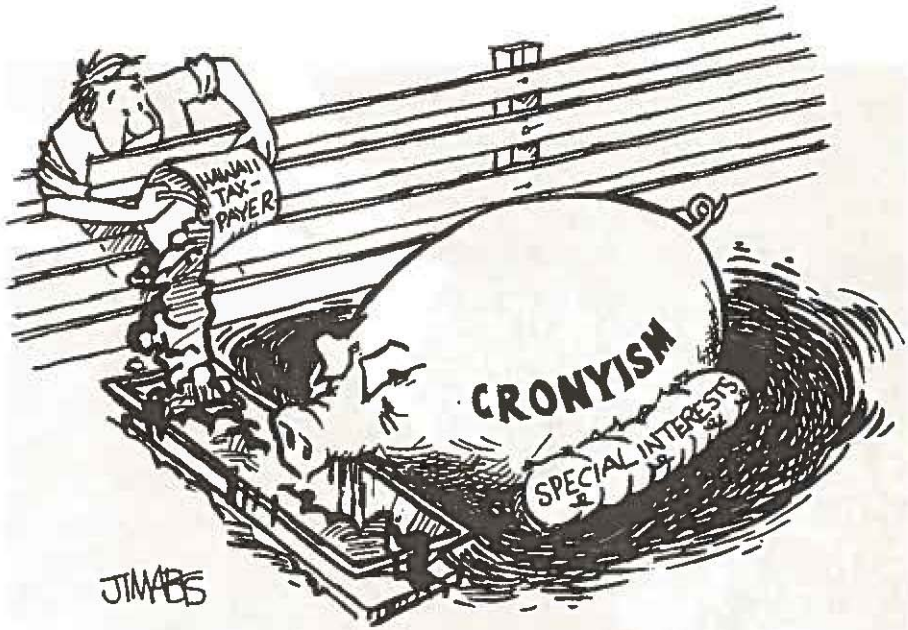
A related network developed out of the first few graduating classes of the UH Law School and, to a degree, the 1978 Constitutional

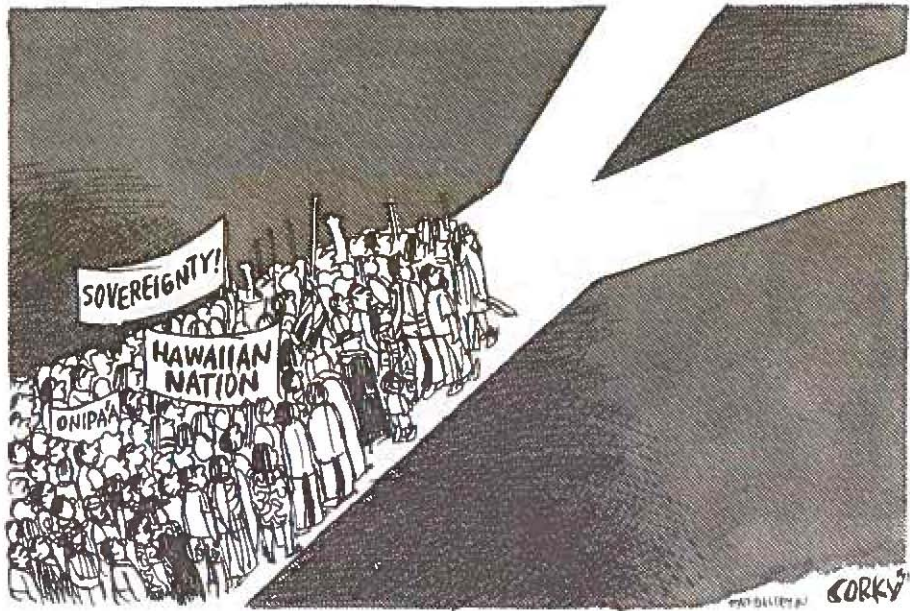
Convention. Both institutions produced people who considered themselves heirs to the power and influence held at that time by the postwar generation of Democrats. And they did indeed rise to power, much more quickly and completely than many had expected. Unfortunately, this group has generated more complaints of cronyism than any other. And as idealistic as the first UH Law School graduates and Con Con delegates were, it's tough to point to a political philosophy (or group goal) that holds them together today. There are strains of the proud localism found in Palaka Power, an environmental awareness that didn't exist in earlier groups, and a grudging acknowledgment that the needs of native Hawaiians must be redressed. But that's about it—hardly enough to define a political movement.

In both cases—Palaka Power and the law school group—there was a conscious effort to recreate the somewhat idealized sense of political mission associated with earlier Democrats. Unfortunately, today's generation doesn't have the crucible of World War II or the symbolic power of the statehood drive to bind them.

Need vision. The challenge for such groups, then, is to define their goals, philosophy, and hopes for Hawai'i in ways that go beyond their own individual political and economic survival. If they do that, the public will decide for itself whether Hawai'i is being led in the proper direction. Cronyism will become a moot issue.

If they fail, if they lack vision (or fail to articulate it), the public will be forced to conclude that those who make up this emerging generation of politicians have little going for themselves other than the fact that they know each other, share a few common experiences, are comfortable with each other—and that they are cronies.





AT A CROSSROAD...