

CHAPTER 30

POLITICAL POWER

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“Have we left the plantation era?”

For many years, powerful business and political interests, typified by the Big Five, used laborers from Asia and the Pacific Islands as their principal vehicle for success. Today, while plantations have declined significantly in size and influence, and the Big Five are gone or greatly reduced in importance, most Hawai'i residents continue to feel the powerlessness and exploitation of plantation life. And they wonder why.

One-party state. Hawai'i's Democratic party came into power in the early 1950s in reaction to the exclusionary philosophy of wealthy, mostly Caucasian Republicans. The Democrats' rise took Hawai'i on a path of unprecedented social and economic growth that led many to believe the exploitive aspects of plantation life would never return. Unfortunately, in the 1970s many of Hawai'i's young Democrats began to advocate an exclusionary political philosophy called “Palaka Power,” named after the blue and white plaid clothing worn by thousands of Hawai'i's plantation laborers. These Democrats espoused a then-radical social and political agenda and were unique in their goal of promoting “local” talent to the exclusion of others. They also sought control of Hawai'i's economy and news media.

Nearly twenty years later, Hawai'i's current Democratic leaders, many of whom were proponents of Palaka Power, find themselves trying to explain flagrant abuses in political fund-raising and govern-

ment procurement. An outraged public knows something is wrong but is confused about the details. Meanwhile, calls for higher ethical standards for government officials go unheeded.

Leaders of the Democratic party have become a "machine" without any apparent redeeming, progressive cause to advance on behalf of the people they were elected to serve. They seem to have lost themselves in their hunger to maintain dominance. They have become the "lunas" the nisei Democrats sought to eliminate in 1954.

Loss of ideology. A growing number of politicians in Hawai'i have lost nearly all their ideology in favor of simply seeking election to public office. This has been done in the name of expediency and is best illustrated by the members of both political parties who have switched their affiliation—sometimes more than once—rather than work toward consensus or constructive change within their original party.

Rewarding friends and punishing enemies has become commonplace in Hawai'i politics as a direct result of this focus on achieving political control. Perhaps Mayor Frank Fasi described this pragmatic approach most clearly in a speech some years ago: "Simply stated, *all else being equal*, you help your friends, you don't help your enemies." Many observers would not be terribly upset by this if they thought the "all else



being equal" part was always kept in mind. Others, including myself, are disgusted by it in any event.

Political fund-raising. Most political experts agree that money is the life blood of a successful campaign. The ability to collect large amounts of monetary and in-kind contributions is the principal reason incumbents consistently beat "no-name" opposition.

One of the hallmarks of a democracy is the right of any citizen to support any candidate for public office. But as documented by *Star-Bulletin* reporter Ian Lind, there are disturbing signs of abusive and unethical fund-raising activities in Hawai'i politics. High on the list is the large amount of money donated (directly and indirectly) to incumbents and to the Democratic party by regular recipients of large government contracts. The strong connection between who gives and who gets to feed at the government trough is shocking.

Some have described this practice as nothing more than a bastardized version of religious tithing applied to the political world. At least a few contributors have acknowledged privately that their political contributions are "required" as a part of doing business with the state and local governments. I view it as the reciprocity element embodied in the Japanese concept of *on*: a custom involving the conferring of a benefit and the begetting of a suitable obligation in exchange. It's a principle that has social merit, but it should not be a part of government practices.

It is not uncommon for wealthy political supporters to arrange for the purchase of costly fund-raiser tickets by their family members, friends, and employees. This practice is a patently unlawful device for getting around the limit on the amount any one individual can give, but it's difficult to enforce. And it's masked by the throngs of "ordinary" people one sees at a typical fund-raiser. Generally, many of these latter folks were given tickets or enticed to attend by the offering of valuable prizes.

Practice versus theory. In theory and under Hawai'i's current campaign spending law, no candidate for state or county office should receive more than \$2,000 per election from any one individual, business, or political action committee. In practice, many candidates receive much more than this amount by exploiting various loopholes in the law and relying on lax enforcement by the Campaign Spending

Commission. For example, as documented by Lind, since 1988 candidates seeking election to a four-year term have been allowed to accept more than \$2,000 for a single election by holding fund-raisers in nonelection years, effectively doubling the maximum contribution limit to \$4,000 per election.

Even Governor Waihee has used this loophole to receive significant contributions, despite the fact that he is prevented from running for a third term as governor and federal campaign spending law prohibits use of such funds in any campaign for federal office. The Campaign Spending Commission finally decided in 1993 to draft rules to control this nonelection year fund-raising practice.

In the past few years, at least a few clever individuals have formed multiple political action committees involving the same people, apparently to act as conduits to fund their favorite candidates. This practice clearly circumvents the spirit of the law and almost as clearly is unlawful. But because it has not yet been *expressly* prohibited by the legislature or tested in the courts, some people call it a loophole and do it anyway.

Some candidates take out enormous loans from themselves and from wealthy family members with no apparent intent to actually repay the loans. I believe this sort of thing is done primarily (if not solely) to get around a state law that prohibits candidates from using more than a total of \$50,000 of their own money and gifts from family members to seek office.

A similar federal law has been held unconstitutional, and Hawai'i's version probably would be, too, if it were tested. But politicians who don't like it ought to challenge it directly rather than utilize cute deceptions that encourage others to "wink" at all fund-raising rules. There ought to be more concern about the spirit of such laws and the need for those who would serve in government to hold themselves to the highest standards of conduct.

"Customary and appropriate." Office of Hawaiian Affairs Chairman Clayton Hee, when asked about the propriety of sending a fund-raising letter to companies several days after inviting them to compete for the right to manage \$136 million in OHA funds, called the practice "customary and appropriate." Unfortunately, Hee was right about it being "customary." State lawmakers, for example, typically hold their



fund-raisers during decision-making time at the legislature.

An executive at one of the companies solicited by Hee refused to comment on it publicly, saying, "We're in the middle of the selection process. . . . I don't think I should say anything." With a lot riding on a pending decision, who can blame someone for not commenting? Do you think this executive refused Hee's invitation to make a contribution?

Retired businessman Herb Cornuelle has suggested that any one company can't really afford to say no when asked to make political contributions, and things will change only when the entire business

community “takes the pledge.” Cornuelle added that a group decision to just say no probably won’t happen, in part because of clouds over Hawai‘i’s economic future.

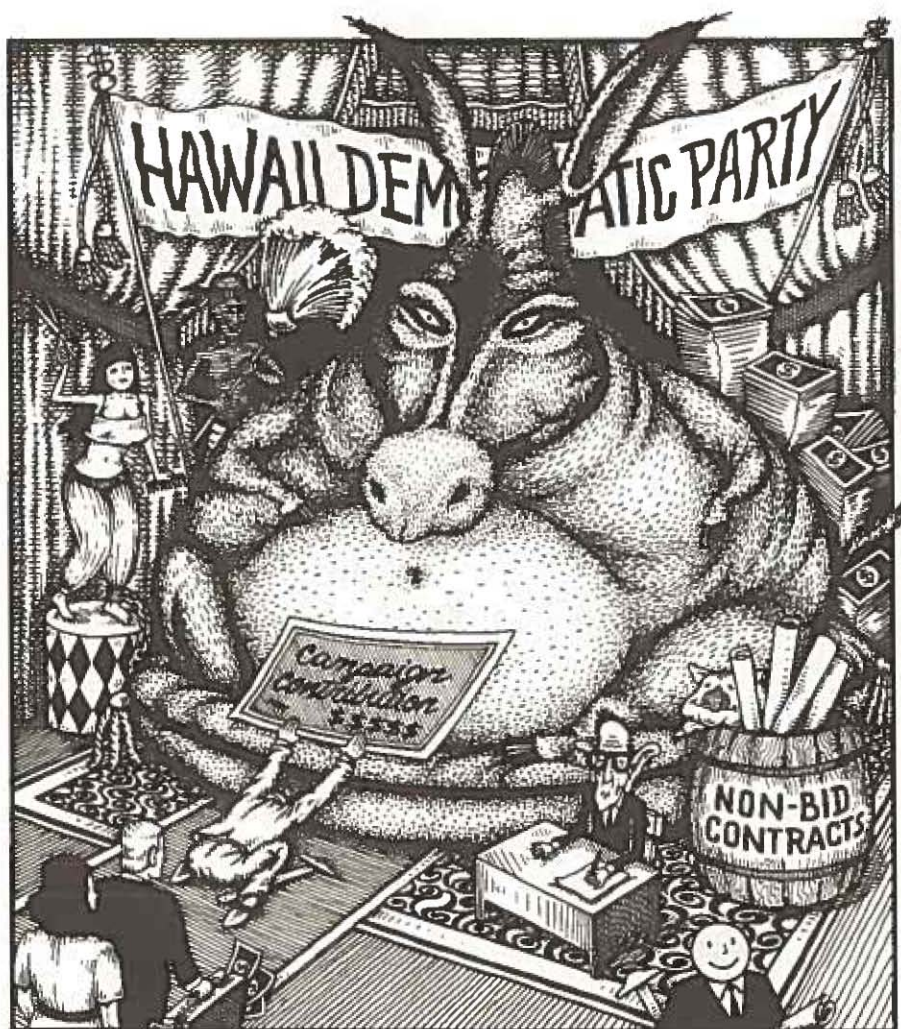
The wave has broken. No one disputes the unparalleled economic prosperity enjoyed by many of our citizens over the past forty years. It is also true, however, that many—particularly native Hawaiians and recent immigrants of all races—have not shared in this economic largesse. The wave of economic prosperity never arrived for them. As for Hawai‘i’s more fortunate residents, the wave has long since broken and is headed back out to sea.

Instead of simply waiting for the next wave of prosperity to hit our shores, we must now concentrate on preparing to become a stronger, more diverse, self-reliant, and fundamentally citizen-oriented community that is less dependent on the vagaries of tourism for its survival. We must also recognize that the social norms of conservative behavior, obedience to authority, conformity, and honoring obligations virtually at any expense—all highly valued in Asian and Pacific Island cultures for centuries—have been taken advantage of by political opportunists. As a result, power and dominance, the worst parts of Hawai‘i’s plantation system, have survived intact and continue to flourish within Hawai‘i’s government and its two major political parties.

This is an especially bitter irony for those residents, including myself, whose parents or grandparents toiled in Hawai‘i’s sugar cane and pineapple fields in an effort to leave the plantation and its physical and economic hardships behind.

Time for change. No single candidate for office ever has served or ever can serve as more than a messenger of change. Instead, grassroots members of all parties must take an active role in shaping the upcoming debates on what Hawai‘i’s cultural, economic, and political directions should be as we prepare to enter the twenty-first century. In particular, we must demand not only that elected officials obey the law, but that they behave within the highest ethical standards of conduct. We must also demand that our elected officials advance first and foremost the interests of all citizens of this state. Over the past few years, we have witnessed far too many signs of just the opposite.

The emperor has no clothes, and it is high time we told him.



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