

POINTS OF VIEW

LETTERS

Power biased?

This is in response to the opinion article by Phil Power (Special interest money now engulfs state's highest court), in which Mr. Power claims that "the tidal wave of special interest money previously focused largely on the Michigan Legislature, has now engulfed our state's highest court."

He expresses concern for the appearance of bias by certain members of the Michigan Supreme Court resulting from campaign contributions they received from business groups. Mr. Power also suggests that it may be a conflict of interest for a judge who accepts a campaign contribution from the Michigan Chamber of Commerce to rule in the future cases in which the chamber may have an interest.

There are several problems with Mr. Power's approach to evaluating judicial campaigns and court proceedings, including his apparent bias.

Interestingly, and not coincidentally, I suspect, Mr. Power chose two examples for his article that just happen to be candidates nominated by the Republican Party: Michigan Supreme Court Justice Clifford Taylor and Justice Maureen Corrigan. The impression he leaves is that the campaign contributions from business groups are not as appropriate as those from contributors to other judicial candidates.

Mr. Power does not mention any of the Democratic justices or candidates and the money they raised. Further analysis is informative.

One of the Democratic candidates for Supreme Court, Wayne County Court Judge Susan Borman, received over \$840,000. Apparently, in Power's view, this is not enough to raise the suspicion of bias. Of that sum, over \$100,000 was donated by lawyers from one plaintiff's personal injury law firm. The other so-called special interest business groups identified and criticized by Power are rarely parties before the Supreme Court, while attorneys from law firms which donated a significant part of candidate Borman's campaign kitty are in front of the Supreme Court on a regular basis.

Power also fails to mention Justice Taylor's opponent, Democratic candidate and Wayne County Circuit Court Judge Carole Youngblood. She had failed to file a post-election campaign disclosure statement at the time Mr. Power prepared his opinion article, and ultimately Judge Youngblood was 39 days late. In addition, she was late in filing three of five required reports this past election. Why not the scrutiny by Mr. Power of Judge Youngblood's failure to timely disclose her contributors as required by state law? Apparently, it didn't matter to Power who Judge Youngblood's contributors were or the amount they gave.

One wonders why Phil Power hasn't expressed concern about contributors to Supreme Court races during the past several decades when Democratic Party nominees for the Supreme Court were the primary recipients of campaign funding, when labor unions and plaintiffs' personal injury attorneys accounted for more than 80 percent of the funding to their Supreme Court nominees, and when judicial decisions were too often contrary to legislative intent and common sense.

Jim Barrett, president
Michigan Chamber of Commerce

Why not?

This is a follow-up to my letter to the editor published March 4, 1999 - "Owing a debt."

In a book "They are All Jews" by Marc Davis, there is a short biography of Bernard M. Baruch, the eminent financier. It said, "Long before the great Wall Street panic of 1929, Baruch urged the most powerful bankers of the country to form a pool so that the market could be sustained. He offered to contribute \$6 million for the purpose, but the proposal was rejected."

Couldn't the most powerful money interests around the world do that in the emerging nations' markets?

Virginia M. Mitchell
Farmington Hills

Able candidates edged out

It wasn't all that surprised when I got the fax from Jim Blanchard.

"I thought long and hard about once again serving the people of Michigan in Washington but have decided not to seek election to the Senate for personal and professional reasons."

For months, Blanchard had been considering running against Republican freshman Sen. Spencer Abraham.

Like most potential candidates, Abraham has been working on fund-raising. Aiming at a \$9 million war chest for his campaign, last week he raised \$1 million at a single event in Livonia. But Abraham was widely regarded as vulnerable, especially to Blanchard, a skilled campaigner and still a popular former governor who served with distinction as ambassador to Canada.

Blanchard's departure from the race says more about the end state to which our politics has descended than it does about Abraham's relative vulnerability. Over the weekend, Blanchard and I talked at length about his decision and about how the current state of politics affected it.

Power: "It seems as though state-of-the-art politics has turned into little more than an exercise in fund-raising."

Blanchard: "I'm afraid that's true. (U.S. Sen.) Carl Levin told me he went to 250 fund-raisers for his last campaign, and I know that I'd have to do something close to that if I decided to run. Politicians today tend to look at people as though they're walking wallets. It's gotten completely out of hand."

Power: "Moreover, the kind of mud-slinging and personal abuse would make anybody but the toughest flinch before getting into a big race." Blanchard: "There's a rule of thumb in politics: You have to want to get elected to whatever office you're running for with every atom of your heart and every piece of your soul. If you have any hesitation at all, it's wise not to do it."

Power: "Campaigns used to be regarded as an opportunity for public debate about issues and a chance for people to show what they're like. Has that changed, too?"

Blanchard: "Entirely. I got into politics because of ideas and people. Ideas to help people. But people, especially. I love old-fashioned campaigning because it puts you directly in touch with people. Media campaigns are just the reverse. They take the candidate away from the people, and they're the main reason politics has



PHILIP POWER

gotten so expensive and requires so much fund-raising."

Power: "So how are you going to contribute? Are you going to withdraw entirely from public service?"

Blanchard: "No. I'm going to be working hard to elect (Vice President Al) Gore. I can live a life of public service, accomplish a lot, have a lot of fun without all the invective and hate, without running for elective office. That's why I took the job as ambassador, and that's why I wrote my book on that experience. I wanted to show young people it's still possible for folks to contribute to society in other ways than running for office."

Blanchard's answers to my questions - thoughtful, humane, practical - helped persuade me that his decision not to make the race for the Senate was the best decision for him ... and the worst outcome for the people of Michigan.

Because, whether you're a Democrat or a Republican, people like Jim Blanchard are exactly the sort who should be making the race for significant office in our country.

No doubt the Democrats will come up with a credible candidate to run against Sen. Abraham. But the net effect of what has happened to our politics in recent years is to have deterred from running for public office precisely the kinds of able, effective, thoughtful and sane people who should be in positions of responsibility in a democracy. Sadly for the republic, the field is increasingly being left to the insecure and the egomaniacal, the wealthy and the celebrities with high name ID and the passionately ideological.

Is this why I'm not surprised Geoffrey Fieger is talking about running for the Senate?

Phil Power has known Blanchard for years and served as chair of job training while Blanchard was governor. Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail: ppower@ceonline.com.

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