

The Washington Post

Intoxicated on fundraising

By Ruth Marcus

Wednesday, June 2, 2010; A15

"You don't have to drink. You just have to pay."

Has there ever been a better summary of how Washington works -- and the need for campaign finance reform -- than this line from a 2007 e-mail?

The context: An executive at Innovative Concepts, a small defense contractor, was balking at going to a wine-tasting fundraiser for [Rep. Jim Moran](#). The Virginia Democrat sits on the House Appropriations subcommittee that controls defense spending -- and the executive's boss made clear that attendance had nothing to do with the quality of the cabernet.

Moran raked in almost \$92,000 at the event, sponsored by the now-defunct lobbying firm PMA Group. And Innovative Concepts received an \$800,000 earmark in the next defense spending bill.

It went almost unnoticed last week, but a plucky new outfit called the [Office of Congressional Ethics \(OCE\) referred to the Justice Department](#) a stack of such e-mails and other evidence collected in its investigation of the PMA Group.

The action came after the House ethics committee -- more accurately described as The Place Sleaze Goes to Die -- did the usual in the face of a [lengthy report submitted by the OCE](#): nothing. An independent board set up by the House after the Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal, the OCE was supposed to goose the lethargic ethics committee into action. It hasn't -- but its ability to gather and release evidence has at least exposed the panel's see-no-evil complacency.

There is nothing necessarily illegal in the Innovative Concepts transaction, which is, of course, the scandal. Washington operates on the tacit understanding that campaign contributions grease the way for access and influence. Both sides in this transaction, lawmaker and donor, perceive, or at least present, themselves as the victim: elected officials as captives of a system that demands incessant fundraising; donors as the target of a none-too-subtle shakedown scheme.

As the legislative director for Teledyne Controls, a California defense contractor, told OCE investigators, "It does go through your mind whether you are buying influence." Yah think? The OCE report details how Indiana Democrat Pete Visclosky told defense contractors to file earmark requests by Feb. 15, sent out invitations to a fundraiser a few weeks later, and submitted earmark requests on behalf of those donors the week after the event.

"Can you give me some justification for giving \$20K to Visclosky?" one executive wrote in an e-mail at the time. Answer: "We have gotten over 10M in adds from him." In business, that's what they call a good return on your investment.

The PMA lobbyists were particularly brazen, but the [continuing influence of lobbyists was demonstrated in a story](#) Monday by [The Post's Dan Eggen](#) about how they collect and distribute campaign cash. Eggen, examining reports required by a new lobbying law, found some astonishing numbers. Brian L. Wolff, a former aide to [House Speaker Nancy Pelosi](#) and director of House Democrats' campaign arm, bundled more than \$600,000 for Democrats in the past year in his new role as top lobbyist for the Edison Electric Institute.

Wolff described the bundling as "my night job." In all, nearly 160 lobbyists raised at least \$9 million in the past year for federal candidates and political parties. Care to speculate how long it takes for their phone calls to be returned?

There is a simple way out of this swamp -- public financing of congressional campaigns. That may seem like a long shot, but such a measure has been introduced in the House by [Connecticut Democrat John Larson](#) and [North Carolina Republican Walter Jones](#), who have assembled an impressive 152 co-sponsors, and in the Senate by [Illinois Democrat Dick Durbin](#) and 20 co-sponsors.

I've expressed concerns about the unintended consequences of public funding laws, but the Fair Elections Now Act is carefully crafted to avoid some of the pitfalls. It sets a high threshold for qualifying (candidates must raise at least \$50,000 on their own in donations of \$100 or less, all from residents of their home state). Grants would be generous enough to encourage participation (\$360,000 for a House primary campaign, for instance) but would also be calibrated to reflect candidates' support, with additional matching funds of \$4 in public money for each \$1 raised by candidates themselves. The estimated cost is \$2 billion to \$3 billion per election.

Real money, but a promising way out of the sickening current arrangement of "you don't have to drink, you just have to pay."

marcusr@washpost.com