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## Three reforms for right now

Though we're old friends, we disagree about much when it comes to North Carolina politics. More than much, actually. Still, whether one is liberal or conservative, activist or libertarian, Democrat or Republican, tough-minded jurist or fuzzied academic, there can be little doubt that North Carolina's political system cries loudly for reform.

Our cascade of scandals has proven relentless. Both legislative and executive leaders have abused the trust of high office. Corruption - sometimes sophisticated, sometimes baldly old-school - has marked the exercise of government power. Quid pro quo, dollar down, purchased influence has given us an embarrassing version of cash register politics. Little wonder a recent Elon University poll would find that 73 percent of North Carolinians believe their government is corrupt. Seventy three, we'd guess, and rising.

A few years ago, one of us was asked to lead an effort to reform our lobbying laws. Those who fought change claimed, relentlessly, that there were no problems with money and politics in our state. No one says that now. And several who argued it so enthusiastically back then have since been sanctioned, or imprisoned. All, regardless of political pedigree, believe in the sanctity of the North Carolina democracy. It's time, beyond time, to clean up the mess.

Of course, we're amid a legislative "short session." It likely exceeds tradition, and reasonable expectation, to anticipate wholesale, pervasive reform. Still, three simple steps could be taken immediately, as down payment, against a commitment to overarching change. The diverse N.C. Coalition for Lobbying and Government Reform, of which we are founding members, urges the governor, the House and the Senate, at a minimum, to secure the following:

1 Curb the economic influence of state contractors - attacking "pay to play." Few things corrode confidence in government more directly than disclosures that those who do business with the state receive contracts and authorities not because they deliver the best products or services, but because they buy off the decision-makers. Political contributions by such contractors - including the officers and leadership (and their immediate families) of the corporations - should be severely curtailed. Restrictions should reign from the onset of the bidding process to the completion of the projects. They should apply to gifts and contributions to all members of the executive branch, from the governor down, who sign and administer the contracts.

2 Stop the revolving door. We've had enough of state employees regulating, supervising and contracting with an industry on one day, and then going to work, for the same outfit, on the next. Government service is a public trust. The influence gained there shouldn't simply be on auction to the highest bidder. Nor should purported regulators skirt their obligations to curry favor with future private employers. State employees must be given at least a one year cooling-off period before being allowed to go to work for those they've been charged to regulate.

3 Disclosure of fundraising and contributions by appointees to boards and commissions. When the governor, the speaker of the House or the president pro tempore of the Senate selects members of the more than 400 regulatory bodies, we ought, at the least, to know how much money the appointees and their families have given to, or raised for, the folks selecting them. And we should know it immediately, patently and publicly when they are chosen.

A study a couple of years ago found that 20 members of the Board of Transportation and their families had contributed over a million dollars to the prior governor's campaign. "Pay to sit" is no better than "pay to play." Wealth and generosity are not obvious measures of expertise, dedication and public commitment. It is not unreasonable to fret over what these selectees believe they are purchasing with such massive gifts.

Our legislature, yet again, faces budget challenges of surpassing difficulty. Deep recession has not been North Carolina's friend. The excruciating choices linked to shortfall will, understandably, command the central focus our lawmakers' attentions and energies.

Still, vibrant democracy assumes an open and equal competition among its members to enact and implement the policies they prefer. No masters, no servants. No oligarchs, no favored financiers.

We haven't lived up to that mandate of late. We have the right to expect better. So let's take at least these modest, consensus-based steps now. They won't solve all our problems. More difficult shoals - like fixing our redistricting process, closing the political party "laundering" loophole, making lobbying law enforcement transparent, eliminating secretive economic development subsidies and responding to the impact of the Citizens United decision - lie ahead. But acting on these straightforward fronts, even in a constrained session, will show we're serious about reclaiming our democracy.

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