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Shortcuts are easy if no one cares

IF VOTERS are more interested in Tom Brady's girlfriend than Sal DiMasi's friends, Beacon Hill stays the same.

The faces change, not the culture.

The campaign for real ethics reform began when longtime Secretary of State William F. Galvin challenged Beacon Hill's thriving network of friends with fiscal benefits.

Galvin pushed and House Speaker Salvatore F. DiMasi fell.

But now, how does this story end? With one man's fall from power and grace, or with tougher laws?

Galvin, a former legislator who served with DiMasi, said he called him to wish him well. "I like Sal. He's a nice guy," he said. "This wasn't about Sal . . . It was about complying with the law."

It's also about understanding what gets done in government, how it gets done, and who benefits from it.

A small circle of DiMasi's friends made big money off their friendship.

Richard Vitale was one of them. He was DiMasi's accountant, former campaign manager, and also, it turns out, his private lender. Vitale gave mortgage money to DiMasi and was also hired by a client to use his influence with DiMasi.

Galvin's office oversees the filing of disclosure reports required by lobbyists and those who retain them. He asked Vitale for information about his work on behalf of a client, the Massachusetts Association of Ticket Brokers. Vitale refused to comply, and his lawyer argued that Galvin lacked the authority to make him.

Thwarted in his efforts, Galvin urged Attorney General Martha Coakley to investigate. The AG did. Vitale was indicted and charged with violations of ethics and campaign finance laws. Di-

Masi has not been charged with anything. But his relationships with Vitale and others drew scrutiny from law enforcement officials. This week, DiMasi resigned.

Because of the ethics concerns swirling around DiMasi and Beacon Hill, Governor Deval Patrick is also promoting a serious reform package that needs approval from lawmakers. New House Speaker Robert DeLeo is pledging to make ethics reform a priority. But there's reason for skepticism, given the track record on Beacon Hill.

"If it doesn't pass soon, it won't pass," Galvin predicted.

If it doesn't pass, blame it on the combination of Beacon Hill culture and public apathy.

Bonds of political loyalty and personal friendship take precedence over other considerations under the Golden Dome. Lawmakers look the other way when a colleague comes under fire, and prefer to give each other the benefit of the doubt. DiMasi's colleagues illustrated the mindset when they gave him the benefit of the doubt three weeks ago and reelected him as speaker.

Beyond that, the public is also less interested in what is happening on Beacon Hill. That allows Beacon Hill to be less interested in what the public thinks, empowering the influence peddlers.

Lobbyists who filed reports with Galvin's office for the first half of 2008 received a total of \$38 million — and that, of course, covers only those who filed. Who knows how many influence peddlers consider themselves as Vitale did — a "strategist" not a lobbyist? The proposed ethics package would eliminate the distinction for reporting purposes.

As Galvin points out, if lobbyists/strategists didn't get results, they wouldn't be paid such grand sums of money.

The special interests they represent have the right to hire people to promote their agenda. But the public has the right to know who is being hired, how much they are being paid, and who their friends are.

Will tolls go up or will there be a gas tax increase? Will racetracks get slots? Will casinos sprout in Massachusetts? Will utilities and healthcare providers continue to benefit from deregulation?

There are lobbyists for every cause. They aren't hired to look out for the public interest. They are hired to persuade a legislator to vote a certain way, to change a certain law, to enrich a certain person or entity.

Galvin said the body of law about ethics and lobbying has one goal: to keep the system corruption-free, by demanding transparency.

But the public has to care, or Beacon Hill won't.

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