



## Machiavelli Still Lives in Hawaii's Legislature

Ira Rohter DRAFT 5/12/07

Wandered the Capitol, checking out the usual end-of-session final Conference Committees, I noticed the swarm of Senators, Representatives, and flying squads of lobbyists scurrying about, negotiating the final deals on which bills would pass or fail, and what details would be included or deleted. "What's going on here, Professor Rohter?" asked a former student I bumped into. "How come so many of the reform bills died?" I smiled — "Look around you. Notice how many of these people — including former Legislators — are lobbyists working hard to get bills passed or killed that affect their clients' piece of the economic pie?"

Nodding his head, he still seemed puzzled. "Haven't you been reading Dave Shapiro's weekly columns in the Advertiser?" Shapiro, a longtime reporter, and former editor of the Star-Bulletin, is pretty blunt about politics these days. "Did you see his article about the gutting of the ethics bill?"

... special interests used to getting their way in the Legislature didn't want to give up their right to buy influence, and legislators didn't wish to give up their right to be bought.

...when there's choice between their own welfare and the public welfare, these legislators will protect their selfish interests every time, whether the issue is ethics, tightening Hawai'i's shamefully lax bribery laws for elected officials or reforming campaign finance rules to give opposing candidates a fair chance. (3/7/07)

The young man frowned, as though Shapiro's accusation was too harsh.

"Didn't you read Machiavelli in your political philosophy class?" I asked. Drawing a blank stare, "You know, that 16th Century Italian guy who wrote The Prince, a handbook filled with hard-nosed advice to rulers about freely using treachery, intrigue, and subterfuge to win and hold political power. You've surely familiar with his famous dictum '*the ends justify the means*' and the term 'Machiavellianism'. Although the book was written nearly 500 years ago, many of today's politicians practice the same get-and-keep power games."

“Here’s Shapiro updated storyline”

"You can tell all you need to know about the dismal state of legislative ethics in Hawai'i by looking at the weaselly path a bill to toughen ethical requirements on lawmakers has taken through the House and Senate this year... After watching the endless bait-and-switch tactics on this bill, you have to wonder if any law can rein in this devious bunch that has demonstrated such mastery at manipulating lawmaking in their self-interest. (April 11, 2007)

### **MORE DISAPPOINTED LOSERS COME BY**

Just then two more supporter of Liberal Causes came by, bemoaning the Legislators’ killing of Death With Dignity and Clean Elections bills. "A poll showed 70% of Hawai`i's residents approved of adults close to death from a terminal illness, being able to get lethal doses of medication to end their lives," said the DWD advocate. “Many lawmakers we talked to say they agree that dying individuals should have that choice. But every year the bill dies."

The Clean Elections partisan jumped in with a similar complaint. "Our survey found two-thirds of Hawai'i's voters want the Legislature to change the way state election campaigns are financed; majorities endorsed the key principles of Clean Elections. In public Legislators say `yes, we shouldn't allow special interest money to affect our politics.' Yet every year they kill our bill."

"Aren't they listening to the community?" they both blurted out.

"Guys, have you forgotten PolSci 101? **Rule #1 for politicians is: get re-elected. So they always ask: "if I support this bill, will it help or hurt my chances of staying in office?"**"

"If they pass a Death with Dignity bill, like Oregon's, they know that the opponents -- even if they represent only 25% of all residents-- are well-organized and will be after their scalps at election time. Law makers know the DWD supporters of not that passionate about the issue, and not organized during campaign season. So, thinks any smart politico, `why jeopardize my chances of being re-elected?'"

"The same stay-in-office logic applies to why they keep killing Clean Elections bills — and ethics reform. As a Democrat in Hawai`i, and as an incumbent, they know they are almost guaranteed to be re-elected. But Clean Elections pose a possible threat to this comfortable situation, since qualified and popular newcomers could attain sufficient public funds, to seriously challenge them. If you are an incumbents, that’s bad. Their in-the-back-rooms mantra is — `Therefore we will never pass Clean Elections. We will shuck and jive their supporters, but in the end, we will kill any significant reforms that MIGHT reduce our power.'"



"But," my earnest young friends protested, "the majority of the public wants these bills passed."

"So what!" I replied, getting a bit frustrated at their naivety. "The politicians know Hawaii's voters almost always reelect incumbents, like sheep following their leader. They know half the eligible voters don't even vote. And they know their backers will give them lots of campaign donations and supply sign wavers and send out mailings for them and so on. .... Are you guys giving them large donations, and helping them campaign? I don't think so."

## A GREEN JOINS US

Just then an environmental activist comes by, likewise looking dejected. "How are your bills doing?" I asked.

"Not so good.... We've been able to push some good ocean protection, energy, land control, and agriculture bills through committees, but they're being cut to pieces in Conference Committee." The rest of us smiled, and in unison chanted: "Welcome to the club!"

Having spent the last year examining Campaign Spending Commission reports listing who gives donations to lawmakers, I knew exactly who was pushing their weight around the Capitol. "Have you guys forgotten **Rule #2 in politics: Follow the money?**"

"Controlled land use and helping small farmers may be good public policy, but look at how much money developers and their allies makes by building resorts, shopping malls, and housing projects on all the Islands. Think Turtle Bay on Oahu's North Shore, whose new international hedge fund owners want to build five additional hotels and condominiums with 3500 new units along the ocean.



"But it's not just wealthy off-shore corporations wanting to build everywhere. It's our own land-owning estates, real estate developers, construction industry and related unions, and tourism and time-sharing businesses who work unceasingly to build projects. They donate tens of thousands of dollars each year to Legislators, County Council members, mayors and the Governor. Can you guess who has the greatest political clout? You greensies, or them?"

**Hawaii's Retarded Energy Program.** Hawaii has nearly unlimited renewable energy sources in wind, solar, wave power and OTEC, yet thanks to Hawaiian Electric and the oil companies, we are still 90% dependent on oil to supply electricity and run our cars and trucks. Other states,



and the Europeans especially, are taking serious steps to reduce oil use because of Climate Change and an anticipated huge jump in the price of oil because of Peak Oil. Yet we have low requirements to shift to renewables, and the best our Legislators can come up with is a task force to merely study ways for Hawaii to reduce emissions, that will produce a plan in 2009, followed by the Dept of Health taking three more years to establish rules that will not take effect until 2012. With a goal

to reduce emissions by only 15% by the year 2020.”

“That goal is ridiculously low, since the scientists say we need to cut emissions by 90% by 2030 if we are to avoid catastrophic climate impacts. The bill is just tokenism, more feet-dragging.”

“So what’s the problem here?” says the Greenie. “We’re not Texas, or the White House, run by oil executives.”

“No,” I said, “but you’re closer to the truth than you think. Hawaiian Electric – HECO – enjoys a ‘good relationship’ with the Speaker of the House, and in addition to their lobbyists roaming the halls, HECO has actually had paid employees working as staffers for key Legislators.”

## EMPTY WORDS

"But they act friendly with us, they are Democrats, and the Party passed Resolutions supporting these issues," says one young Liberal who had participated in the Convention last year.

"They might like you, but they don't fear you!" I replied. "As our old friend Machiavelli observed:"

*Men are less hesitant about harming someone who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared.....love is held together by a chain of obligation which, since men are wretched creatures, is broken on every occasion in which their own interests are concerned; but fear is sustained by dread of punishment ....*



Now gloomy faced, our Liberal raised a last objection: "But all the Legislators can't be so self-absorbed, can they?"

"No," I responded, "there are some good ones. Nothing like the number of true reformers back in the 1960s who overthrew the Big-5 dominated Republicans and led the Democratic revolution. But I'm afraid that Machiavelli has it nailed about today's politicians."

*Ambition is so powerful a passion in the human breast, that however high we reach we are never satisfied.*

In another of his treatises, Machiavelli reminds us –

**...there is nothing more difficult to execute, nor more dubious of success, ...than to introduce a new order to things; for he who introduces it has all those who profit from the old order as his enemies; and he has only lukewarm allies in all those who might profit from the new.**

“If you want to succeed at the Capitol, you’ve got to be a realist. You can’t depend on their good will to pass bills that affect special interests, or themselves. Legislators respect power. Your strength is grassroots organizing. You must be seen as a threat, able to support a challenger who

might run against them next year. Groups like Save Our Kakaako Coalition, Save Sandy Beach, Save Sunset Beach, and Save Ki Iwi were listened to because they display political muscle”

**“Don’t just get angry, Organize!”**

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