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Time to stand up to end corruption

REFORMING ILLINOIS | An occasional series on fixing our politics and government

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People of Illinois, are you tired of being the laughingstock of the nation when it comes to political corruption?

Outsiders dub us "the Nigeria of the Midwest."

The Brits, in the Economist magazine, sniff at Illinois as "exceptionally corrupt" and "exceptionally lawless."

When corruption scandals hit other states -- Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Louisiana -- politicians react by passing meaningful statewide reforms.

That's right -- even Louisiana.

But in Illinois, where one former governor sits in prison and his successor is under indictment, what have our state lawmakers given us in the way of reform?

Peanuts.

Forty-six states impose limits on how much campaign cash people can give state and local politicians.

Not Illinois.

Forty-six states grant local prosecutors commonsense legal tools to go after public corruption.

Not Illinois.

Do you see a pattern here?

On Tuesday, the Illinois Reform Commission, appointed by Gov. Quinn and led by former federal prosecutor Patrick Collins, unveiled an 88-page report that suggests a series of fundamental changes in how this state should operate.

The commission was assigned to dig through the muck and propose sensible ways to fumigate state government, and it has done a terrific job.

In 100 short days, these unpaid commissioners traveled the state, listened to dozens of citizens, consulted a slew of experts and produced a thoughtful, practical and even inspiring document.

A document we wholeheartedly endorse, with a few quibbles. (The commission, for instance, suggests moving election primaries from February to June, while we think March or April makes more sense.)

The commission's report recommends:

- • Limiting how much politicians can receive in campaign donations -- following the federal model -- while increasing how frequently and quickly they must disclose those contributions.
- • Improving the way the state buys goods and services by eliminating loopholes in the law and setting up a monitor with true power to stop dirty deals before they happen.
- • Reforming the way the state draws congressional and state legislative districts so incumbents don't have a built-in unfair advantage when running for re-election.
- • Giving local prosecutors some of the tools federal authorities have had for decades, such as a practical state racketeering law, to go after political corruption.
- • Making it easier for citizens to get public information about how their governments are spending their money.
- • Changing the culture of

corruption by combatting patronage in state government with the help of an independent hiring monitor.

In this short space, we can't do justice to spelling out the report's recommendations, and we urge readers to read the entire report at suntimes.com/news/commentary.

For all the report's good sense, though, it's nothing but an 88-page doorstop if the people of Illinois -- all of us -- fail to rally behind the urgently needed reforms.

Cynics are already carving its tombstone.

Dead on arrival, they say.

And they may be right.

Our state's most powerful lawmakers, truth be told, want nothing to do with most of these reforms. Some of the proposed changes would whittle away their power. Others would embolden local prosecutors to go after crooked pols and their cronies. Still other reforms would make it much tougher to award sweetheart deals to pals.

In the coming weeks, you'll hear plenty of arguments against these reforms, many of which will sound perfectly reasonable. But we urge you to question those arguments and find the self-serving nonsense at their core.

A number of lawmakers have already suggested that the proposed reforms are impractical and even radical and would slow the state's everyday workings to a crawl.

In truth, most of the suggested reforms are already the law in other states -- and work just fine.

In the area of campaign finance reform, some lawmakers worry that the commission's proposed campaign contribution limits are too low and would put them at a huge disadvantage against a millionaire opponent with a huge personal war chest.

More nonsense.

We just don't know many millionaires who pine to make a second career in the Illinois General Assembly.

In Congress, sure.

In Springfield, not so much.

We're not saying the commission's proposals couldn't stand a little tinkering, but we'll be looking for suggestions for improving -- not gutting -- them.

If this bold package of political reforms is not enacted into law now -- in this spring legislative session -- we fear it never will be.

We have a public that is disgusted by the shenanigans of two disgraced former governors. We have an incumbent governor who has built his career on championing reform. We have a Legislature that surely must understand, finally, that the usual fake gestures of reform won't cut it with the public and the press this time.

There is only one thing state lawmakers fear more than enacting true political reform: not getting re-elected.

We agree with Quinn's suggestion that state lawmakers should vote on each of the commission's proposals up or down -- no shuffling a bill off to die in a committee -- to let the public know where they stand.

When this legislative session is over, we'll report to you who voted for real reform and who faked it -- and come re-election time, we'll tell you again.

But even before then, let your state senator and representative know you want 100-proof, real reform, not the watered-down stuff.

In the end, we, the people of Illinois, will get the political reform we deserve.

If we sit back and fail to speak out, we'll get more of the same -- peanuts.

And we'll have no one to blame but ourselves.

Momentum for reform was 'too great' to resist

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The Need for National Election Law Reform

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