

At the Tipps of reform in Ohio

The dubious conversion of a superlobbyist

Type and click your way to the Web site of Reform Ohio Now (www.reformohionow.org), and you will immediately encounter: "Corrupt politicians. Lost jobs. Ohio awash in scandal. It's time for a change."

Plunge deeper and the question appears: "What is 'Coingate?'"

The answer cites the role of Thomas Noe, rare coin dealer and longtime Republican Party fund-raiser and contributor, at the center of the scandal at the Bureau of Workers' Compensation, adding that all of it reflects "the 'pay-to-play' system that has infected the halls of state government for years."

Reform Ohio Now has placed four proposed constitutional amendments on the Nov. 8 ballot. (On this page today, the editorial board examines issues 2 and 3, with plans to address 4 and 5 next Sunday.) The measures are cleverly packaged, promising greater competitiveness in elections, via doses of nonpartisanship, strict campaign contribution limits and greater ease in casting your ballot. Reform Ohio Now urges those fed up with the failed leadership of the state to vote yes on all four. A television ad reinforces the message: Opponents of the proposed amendments are portrayed as "power-hungry, back-room dealers with millions to spend."

Note, especially, the mention of a Statehouse driven by the "pay to play" culture "for years." Then, consider the role of Paul Tipps, hardly a recognizable name in these parts yet long one of the most influential power brokers at the Statehouse. The former chairman of the Ohio Democratic Party and now superlobbyist has spearheaded Reform Ohio Now. The Hollywoodish suggestion is: Even Tipps, someone who has reveled in the dark side of political life, has become disenchanted with the workings of the state.

Before wallowing in the romance of the story, chart the vast distance that Tipps has supposedly traveled, a committed debauchee suddenly seeing the light of good government, a conversion experience, say, of biblical proportions.

In the 1990s, Tipps played a leading role in the honoraria scandal that rattled the legislature. Organizations with an interest in the doings of state government invited lawmakers to receptions and the like, rewarding them for their appearances, often with a \$500 check, the maximum amount allowed without having to report the payment. Lawmakers pocketed the money without fear of their constituents learning of the corrupting practice.

Multiple checks passed at the Tipps home as lawmakers dined with guests connected to the former Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Ohio. Lawmakers benefited from "pancaking," a stack of \$500 checks piled onto their palms. Thus, they took home more cash, neatly evading the reporting requirements.



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This dining experience coincided with one of the most audacious maneuvers ever attempted at the Statehouse. Blue Cross & Blue Shield (with Tipps as its hired gun) pressed for legislation that would have greased its hostile takeover of the other Blue operations in the state. The company wanted no less than the government to intervene in the marketplace on its behalf, forcing resistant companies to succumb.

The bid failed. Lawmakers entered guilty pleas in the honoraria mess. Among the convicted was Vern Riffe, a most powerful House speaker and longtime ally of Tipps. Eventually, Blue Cross & Blue Shield imploded. Tipps and his lobbying associates collected \$869,000 for their work.

This wasn't an isolated episode. Tipps has surfaced repeatedly (along with his partner, Neil Clark, the Republican of their realm). Take the effort of Metropolitan Life to strike a sweetheart deal with the state in the 1980s, Tipps adding his influence. His firm famously submitted a one-page bill for \$269,603 to the Ohio Turnpike Commission, details all but omitted, the executive director declaring himself satisfied with the work. In 2000, the chairman of the House Finance and Appropriations Committee stepped down to take a post with Tipps and Clark, reflecting term limits and the pull of uberlobbyists.

Pardon my skepticism, my doubts that the "back-room dealer" has changed his ways, putting the interests of the whole ahead of the narrow agenda of his client. If nothing else, the methods of Tipps and Reform Ohio Now are unsound.

Democrats are understandably frustrated about their puny role in the state. Yet they share the blame for what ails Ohio, the miserable lack of leadership, the party performing pathetically the past decade or more, conceding the arena to Republicans. Now they hope to gain momentum through a set of largely partisan constitutional amendments that are poorly crafted in too many instances.

This country's Founders didn't care for direct democracy. They worried about the tyranny of the majority, about forging laws without the benefit of government, the give and take of the legislature highlighting weaknesses, allowing time for improvement. California has become virtually ungovernable because voters too often have followed their immediate passions, approving measures that conflict and collide.

Trust the Ohio legislature more than the people of the state? Don't forget the people elected those lawmakers. The question is how to reflect most effectively the consent of the governed. The Founders preferred elected officials operating within checks and balances (even thwarting a most powerful lobbyist). That is where Democrats should focus, capturing seats in the legislature, winning statewide offices.

These ballot issues may carry the allure of doing big things. Then ask: Is a Paul Tipps really a convert?

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