



Column: Do as I Say, Not as I Do

Wouldn't it be nice to make rules that apply to everyone but yourself? That's kind of what we have done in Madison. Whether it is open records, open meetings or even ethics laws, our state politicians have carved out exemptions for themselves that leave me wondering what the heck is going on in Madison.

You probably already know that Wisconsin legislators can't give themselves a raise. Instead, legislative pay raises can only take effect after the next election. You don't get the benefit unless you get rehired by the voters. That makes sense.

But in this past year, the Legislature gave all of our campaigns a pay raise, effective immediately. Apparently, politicians didn't like how much money we were able to raise off individual donors so they doubled the contribution limits across the board. Imagine what we can do with all that money, how many thousands more robo-calls and TV ads we can barrage you with. Oh, and don't forget the unlimited corporate money that we've opened the floodgates for. Did I mention that the legislature has dismantled the entire watchdog agency tasked with overseeing our campaign spending and replaced it with partisan loyalists? I guess for some reason it seemed like a better idea to put the foxes firmly in charge of the hen house.

Seriously, is this how democracy is supposed to work?

Here is another example. In Wisconsin, we have something called the Open Meetings Law. It means that our government meetings are open to anyone who wants to attend and watch democracy in action. We have to follow that rule on the County Board, as does every local unit of government. But inside the Capitol, we play by a different set of rules. We can have closed caucus meetings where no one else is allowed to attend. No reporters can monitor our activity, no outsiders can watch what deals get cut, and no cameras can record what we say.

And even when we are on the floor of the Assembly, politicians still are pulling every trick out of the bag to discourage the public from finding out what really happens down here. A citizen of Wisconsin can sit in the gallery, but they can't make any noise, carry a pen or pad of paper, take pictures, hold a sign or wear a political t-shirt. Parents can't even bring coloring books to occupy their kids. You can, however, bring a gun. Go figure.

We have always prided ourselves in Wisconsin on an open and transparent form of government. How is that supposed to continue if we are actively cutting off every avenue our constituents have to oversee what we are doing? The attitude seems to be, just write us big checks, but keep your nose out of what we're doing. That's just plain wrong.

One of the things I worry about the most for the future is the proposed destruction of our Open Records law. Every document in our offices is subject to an open records request; anyone can



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write in and request information. You want it, you got it. Sometimes this is used by reporters to investigate legislators. Other times it is used by our opponents to find our weaknesses. But it is the law and it is an important tool in keeping us accountable.

However, for the past year, some of our leaders have been trying to destroy the law or at least weaken it, so that it doesn't apply to legislators. Their belief is that everyone else in government should be subject to it, except us. You deserve better than that.

Maybe next year will be different. Each session, we hear candidates say they are committed to clean, open and transparent government. I certainly hope so. And let's start with making us more accountable to the voters. After all, we work for you. At least that's the way it's supposed to be.

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