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Strengthen state ethics law

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Mar 04, 2011

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The entire nation is still clambering through the rubble of a horrific economic downturn, and Hawaii legislators believe the takeaway message is what? That their mission should be clearing the pathway for state employees to accept freebies?

Evidently so — or, at the very least, that seems to be the mindset of state Sen. Brickwood Galuteria (D, Downtown-Waikiki). Galuteria floated the idea of changing the law so that gifts valued up to \$200 could be accepted by state employees, under any circumstance.

In the midst of the firestorm that predictably erupted at Tuesday's public hearing, Galuteria's incredible excuse was that his version of Senate Bill 671 was "a starting point" for discussion.

No, senator. The starting point was the original version of SB 671, which would have strengthened disclosure

requirements for lobbyists. Gutting an ethics bill and then piping in language that enables guilt-free influence-peddling takes a special kind of audacity. Galuteria just earned his place in the Hall of Shame.

Ironically, this whole mess was the end result of a right-minded move: Senate President Shan Tsutsui asked the Ethics Commission for an opinion on lawmakers accepting \$200 tickets to a Hawaii Institute for Public Affairs Leadership Awards Dinner. Les Kondo, executive director of the commission, answered that accepting them would be an ethics breach. HIPA took the matter to the Legislature, and Galuteria, Senate majority leader, came up with his solution.

Representatives of HIPA and other nonprofits testified that drawing a line as strictly as Kondo recommended would close down an opportunity to educate lawmakers about their charitable missions.

Not true, Kondo said: Lawmakers can attend such events but they need to buy their own tickets, just like anyone else who wants to support the nonprofit.

He's absolutely right.

The Senate Judiciary and Labor Committee voted to move along the bill, but its chairman, Sen. Clayton Hee, has promised that lawmakers would "eviscerate" the bill and work with the Ethics Commission on a revision.

Hee suggested it might be possible to carve out an exception for charitable fundraisers, but he hasn't made a case for it. Kondo should stick to his guns and insist that the current strict interpretation of the law remain in effect. Accepting small gifts and meals valued at under \$25 is reasonable, allowing lawmakers to socialize modestly with constituents. There is no reason legislators deserve special perks, even if it's from a charity. The event is to raise funds, after all, and the nonprofit should raise them, tapping the lawmakers, too.

Government has lost enough of the public's trust over the years without straining what's left. Come to think of it, it might be wise to keep close tabs on SB 671, to make sure lawmakers don't pull a fast one.

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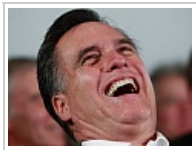
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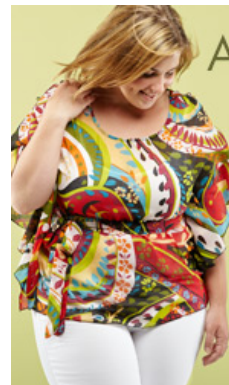
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