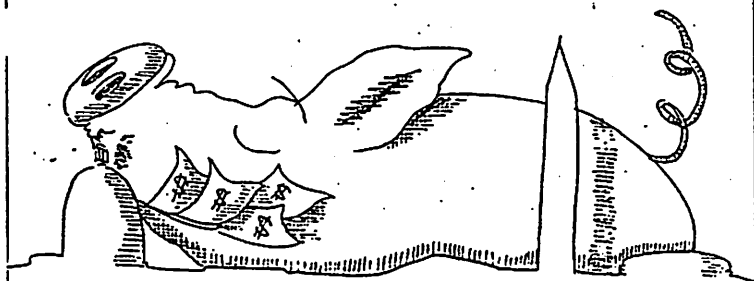


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BY MARGARET SCOTT

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Just What Is A Special Interest?

President Clinton, in his State of the Union address, beseeched Congress to enact campaign finance reform to reduce "special interest" influence. Campaign finance reforms that the president favors would constrict fundamental democratic freedoms to participate in the political process. In other words: speech would be limited and some citizens' freedom to participate in elections beyond voting would be "reformed" out of existence based on their alleged status as "special interests." But if "special interest" is not defined, how are we to know just whose influence should be curbed?

Judging from the fervent bipartisan (and third party) scorn heaped on "special interests," the casual observer would logically assume that this scourge of democracy was readily identifiable. The Congressional Record, newspaper editorials and campaign speeches are replete with diatribes against the "special interests." A recent search of newspapers on the Nexis database found more than 60,000 articles and editorials containing the phrase "special interest."

"Special interest" is the most pejorative phrase in the American political lexicon since "communist-pinko." Judging from the reformers' scathing rhetoric, rooting out these special interests is a job for a new Senate Committee on Un-American Activities.

In fact, the special interest tag depends on the viewer's vantage point rather than on any objective criteria. So-called good government groups would have people believe that the antonym is "public" interest—as defined by them. These groups usually construe good government to mean big government and therefore deem big government to be in the public interest. By this logic, opposition to any government regulation or tax virtually guarantees a special interest charge.

Capitalism should not be a dirty word in a free society, but having observed the enmity directed toward its practitioners in many quarters, one could reasonably wonder. Some nonprofit so-called "good government" groups readily pin the special interest label on profit-seeking enterprises. Yet behind corporate balance sheets are employees, families, shareholders and communities of which they are part.

Does the special interest connotation extend to employees and their families? To the legions of Americans whose retirement funds and investments are keyed to the stock market? By such extrapolation does the "special interest" smear cut a wide swath?

What happens when a purported public interest organization is funded by a group that is universally regarded as a "special interest," such as the plaintiffs' lawyers? Are we to conclude that the special interest in this instance is subsumed in the nobler public interest? Or is the public interest group simply laundering the special interest influence money and acting as a front organization? Or is it merely coincidence when their interests converge on, say, lawsuit reform?

Most people would probably conclude that a special interest is contrary to the majority interest. Should special interest be defined as being not immediately relevant to more than 49.9 percent of American citizens? Must its membership comprise a majority of the country to be legitimate? If so, such a qualification should be carefully pondered, as "special interests" could be equated with any narrow or minority interest, thus automatically tarnishing what could be a very worthy cause.

Being a senator from Kentucky, I regularly go to bat for Kentucky industries (and their employees, suppliers and subcontractors) threatened by onerous regulations and taxation. These industries may, in the minds of some people, epitomize "special interest." To me, they and the Kentuckians whose livelihoods depend on them are constituents, and my assistance to them is in the public's interest.

Is a Pacific Northwest lumber company automatically a special interest? The company's employees? How about the Washington-based environmentalists who would sacrifice jobs and disrupt human lives for the sake of an owl? Are owls special interests?

The truth is that the special interest label is a political weapon utilized, often reflexively and perhaps thoughtlessly, by people throughout the ideological spectrum. It can be found in statements I have made in the past. Using it is a hard habit to break. Nevertheless, in the interest of more honest and civil public discourse, the invocation of the "special interest" mantra to propel a reform agenda or wound an opponent is a habit that should be broken.

All Americans have a constitutional right to petition the government and participate in the political process, however unpopular the cause or narrow its appeal may be. Americans do not forfeit those rights because they have been tagged with the special interest label.

The campaign finance reform debate, in particular, is advanced on the premise that special interest influence is pervasive, corrosive, and must be abated at all costs. But the cost of the alleged reforms in terms of constitutional freedom for all Americans is high. And the special interest premise is deeply flawed. So the next time you hear someone hail campaign finance reform as the answer, ask them what is the question. And when they say special interest influence is the problem, ask them: What is a special interest?

The writer is a Republican senator from Kentucky and chairman of the Senate Ethics Committee.