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Virginia Politicians and Highway Pork

by Jacob G. Hornberger

For a good example of the moral perversity of the budget-busting, pork-barrel highway bill, consider what recently happened in Bristol, Virginia. While on his annual statewide “listening tour” across the state, Republican Sen. George Allen proudly told Bristol voters that their local officials were going to receive even more money from Congress than they had requested for the renovation of the local train station.

Rep. Rick Boucher, a Democrat, had requested only \$400,000 for the project. Not to be outdone, Sen. John Warner, a Republican, had requested \$1 million for the same project.

So what did Congress do? It simply combined the two numbers and awarded Bristol officials a grant of \$1.4 million. Laughing about the situation, Allen said, “Congress works in mysterious ways. I’ll guarantee they will use this extra \$400,000.”

Extra \$400,000? Didn’t Allen actually mean “extra \$1 million,” given that Boucher’s request implied that the project could be done for \$400,000? Oh well, what’s a million dollars to taxpayers who have trouble saving any money these days?

Unfortunately, this is how democracy works in America today, compliments of the U.S. Congress. Federal representatives return home to their constituents and proudly tell them, “Look at the free federal money I have brought home to you. I represent you well. I fight for your interests. Be sure to remember what I have done for you when election day rolls around.”

Yet isn’t the entire process nothing more than a corrupt way to purchase votes in advance of an election? Rather than simply stuff cash into the hands of individual voters, which would be illegal, they stuff grants of cash into the hands of local public officials and ask their constituents to return them to office so that they can do more of the same.

Even worse, people are actually grateful for being serviced in this way. After all, don’t forget that it is people’s very own money that is ultimately being used to fund projects. The money is withheld from people by their employers, compliments of Congress, and paid to the IRS, which then puts the money at the disposal of Congress, which then dispenses it to local government officials.

The grateful voters from Bristol then clap and happily say, “Thank you, Mssrs. Boucher, Warner, and Allen for having the IRS take our hard-earned money and returning a portion of it to our local public officials to renovate our train station. We are so grateful for what you have done for us. Please do more of it in the future. You are so effective.”

Or more likely, the voters simply convince themselves that the “free” federal money is actually coming out of the income and savings of their fellow citizens in other parts of the country. Ironically, people in other parts of the country are thinking the same thing when their representatives return and proudly make the same sort of announcements in their area. To paraphrase the 19th-century French free-market legislator Frédéric Bastiat, the federal highway bill provides a good example of how the federal government has become a fiction by which everyone is trying to live at the expense of everyone else.

This is what democracy in America is now all about. Everyone in Washington knows that there is no better way for a member of the U.S. House or Senate to ingratiate himself with voters than by announcing, “Free federal pork for your community. Come and get it.”

When will this moral perversity be brought to a halt? Only when the American people stop rewarding this corrupt practice with accolades, praise, and gratitude and instead greet political announcements of federal grants with the indignation, disdain, and condemnation they deserve.

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