



It has happened again

Nevada Senate Majority Leader Kelvin

Atkinson resigned in disgrace last week after indicating he would plead guilty to federal charges of misusing campaign funds to benefit himself. It was a humiliating moment for Atkinson and a mortifying one for Democrats because he's not the first Nevada legislator to behave badly in recent years.

There was Assemblymember Wendell Williams who refused to file required campaign finance reports and then ignored the fines. Assm. Morse Arberry received a six-month suspended sentence for a misdemeanor related to funneling more than \$100,000 in campaign funds to his personal account. Sen. Mark Manendo was forced to resign after an investigation documented many years of sexual harassment at the legislature. Sen. Ruben Kihuen was investigated by Congress for repeated incidents of the same type of behavior, some of which occurred while he was a state legislator.

I served with each of these Democrats, and their conduct is deplorable and deeply disappointing.

Corruption and unethical behavior is not a problem exclusive to Democrats, of course. Over the years, more than one Republican legislator was widely suspected of living on a campaign account or hiding illegal spending behind generic credit card expenses. And we need only Google Gov. Jim Gibbons or U.S. Sen. John Ensign to find unethical sexual behavior.

The reality is that legislators in both parties have resisted policing their colleagues. Lobbyists haven't been much better, preferring not to rock the boat when a contribution they've given mysteriously fails to appear on a campaign report after the legislator "forgot" to report it. And the general public hasn't shown much interest in meaningful campaign finance reform.

The Nevada GOP was quick to pounce on Atkinson's woes, issuing a statement that insinuated more Democratic corruption is expected. The claim that "we have no clue how many more will be forced from office when this is all said and done" is opportunism, an attempt to milk the most advantage

out of the situation. The Democratic Party would likely use the same level of hyperbole if the shoe were on the other foot.

In a dramatic and tearful scene in the Senate, Atkinson apologized for his actions. It was refreshing: "I accept full responsibility for my actions and cannot express the depth of my remorse; I am truly sorry ... and I have no one to blame for this but myself." Others have not been so forthright.

Atkinson's descent into the darkness of corruption is a personal failing, and he'll be punished accordingly. But it's also the failure of an institution that has only recently started to come to terms with the need for accountability. It took years to get a gift ban passed, but in 2015 legislators finally approved one. Legislators must now also disclose their subsidized attendance at "educational" events such as the Nevada Mining Association's annual luxury weekend at Lake Tahoe.

It's time for legislators to tackle the bigger issue of campaign cash, including the loophole allowing corporate "bundling" of

large donations from multiple businesses, making the \$10,000 contribution limit meaningless and addressing the churning of money through political action committees, hiding the real source of substantial contributions. Audit authority must be allowed to randomly review campaign expenses to make sure they are legitimate. And party leaders must try harder to change the insidious culture of legislative entitlement and push back on the belief that "everyone does it." It's an opportunity the Senate's new female Cannizzaro/Ratti leadership team should seize.

Atkinson's criminal activities are inexcusable. Instead of partisan hyperbole, let's have a serious discussion about the significant reforms legislators should enact. Until there's a collaborative effort to clean up the system, both parties should be wary of casting partisan stones. □

Do politicians themselves recognize the level of corruption? See <https://tinyurl.com/zcmhssx>

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