



Comment

Something stinks in America

As a leading Republican prepares to face corruption charges, the fallout will be felt as far afield as Westminster

Will Hutton
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[The Observer](#)

- ▶ The most important political event last week for Britain did not take place at the Labour party conference in Brighton, but in Travis County, Texas. District Attorney Ronnie Earle charged the second most powerful man in the United States, Tom DeLay, with criminal conspiracy. DeLay resigned as the majority leader of the Republicans in the House of Representatives while he fights the case, a stunning political setback.

American conservatism that has shaped American and British politics for 20 years has been holed below the waterline. It will take a lot more to sink it, but DeLay's indictment is symptomatic of a conservative over-reach and endemic corruption that will trigger, at the very least, a retreat and maybe even more. One-Nation Tories and honest-to-God Labour politicians can take some succour; the right-wing wind that has blown across the Atlantic for nearly a generation is about to ease. Hypocrisies have been exposed. The discourse in

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British politics is set to change.

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The story begins in the murky world of campaign finance and the grey area of quasi-corruption, kickbacks and personal favours that now define the American political system. American politicians need ever more cash to fight their political campaigns and gerrymander their constituencies, so creating the political truth that incumbents rarely lose. US corporations are the consistent suppliers of the necessary dollars and Republican politicians increasingly are the principal beneficiaries. Complicated rules exist to try to ensure the relationship between companies and politicians is as much at arm's length as possible; the charge against DeLay is that he drove a coach and horses through the rules.

If DeLay were another Republican politician or even a typical majority leader of the House, the political world could shrug its shoulders. Somebody got caught, but little will change. But DeLay is very different. He is the Republican paymaster, one of the authors of the K Street Project and the driving force behind a vicious, organised demonisation and attempted marginalisation of Democrats that for sheer, unabashed political animus is unlike anything else witnessed in an advanced democracy. Politicians fight their political foes by fair means or foul, but trying to exterminate them is new territory.

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The K Street Project is little known outside the Washington beltway and its effectiveness as a political stratagem is only possible because of the unique importance of campaign finance to American politics. DeLay, together with Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum and some conservative activists, notably the ubiquitous Grover Norquist who runs the anti-state, anti-tax lobby group 'Americans for Tax Reform', conceived the notion 10 years ago that they should use the Republican majority in the House as a



lever to ensure that the lobbyists, law firms and trade associations that inhabit Washington's K Street, heart of the industry, should only employ Republicans or sympathisers. To be a Democrat was to bear the mark of Cain; K Street was to be a Democrat-free zone.

This, if it could be pulled off, would have multiple pay-backs. Special-interest groups and companies have always greased the palms of American law-makers and because of lack of party discipline, they have had to grease Democrat and Republican palms alike to get the legislation they wanted. DeLay's ambition was to construct such a disciplined Republican party that lobbyists would not need Democrats, and so create an inside track in which the only greased palms from legislators to lobbyists would be Republican.

Lobbyists, law firms and trade associations should be told not to employ Democrats, so progressively excluding them from access to the lucrative channels of campaign finance. Democrats would become both poorer and politically diminished at a stroke and the Republicans would become richer and politically hegemonic.

It has worked. The most influential Washington lobbyist is Barbour, Griffiths and Rogers; it employs not a single Democrat. Last year, in a classic operation, House Republicans let the Motion Picture Association of America (the film industry lobby group) know that appointing a Democrat, Dan Glickman, as its head would mean \$1.5 billion of tax relief for the film industry was now in peril. Glickman staffed up the MPAA with Republicans, but the threat remains. In 2003, the Republican National Committee could claim that 33 of the top 36 top-level K Street positions were in Republican hands. Today, it's even closer to a clean sweep.

Corporations get their rewards. The oil and

gas industry now gives 80 per cent of its campaign cash to Republicans (20 years ago, the split was roughly 50-50), and influence on this year's energy bill was a classic sting. American petrol can now contain a suspected carcinogen; operators of US natural-gas wells can contaminate water aquifers to improve the yields from the wells; the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is open to oil exploration - concessions all created by DeLay's inside track. And to provide ideological juice, there's a bevy of think-tanks, paid for from the same web of contributions, cranking out the justification that the 'state' and 'regulation' are everywhere and always wrong.

But central to the operation is DeLay's mastery of the party in the House. To get two more Republican votes in his pocket, he organised a gerrymander in Texas to create two more seats in the 2004 election and gave the Republican campaign there some extra campaign money. The trouble was, alleges the DA, the cash from Washington originally came from Texan companies, which are forbidden directly to back individual candidates and that DeLay devised the illegal scheme.

DeLay vigorously insists he's the victim of a partisan stitch-up, surely a case of the biter bit? Yet the scope for misdirection of political funds is huge. Michael Scanlon, DeLay's director of communications for six years, is under criminal investigation together with partner Jack Abramoff for the way they used \$66 million, paid by 11 casino-owning native American tribes over three years into their K Street operation, and which seems to have financed, among other extraordinary expenditures, a DeLay golf trip to Scotland. Nobody checks too much on how their money is deployed as long as it brings results - access, tax breaks and legislative concessions. DeLay, Scanlon and Abramoff belong to the same culture.

In Congress, moderate Republicans don't want guilt by association and companies value their reputation. The K Street Project stinks, along with all those associated with it. So far, the US media have been supine. DeLay's tentacles, and those of Karl Rove, Bush's top political adviser, have cowed media owners into the same compliance; if they want favours, best advance the Republican cause like Murdoch's Fox News. American newsrooms are fearful places.

But DeLay's indictment breaks back the dam. US politics moves in cycles. Once it was Republicans who were going to clean up corrupt Democrat Washington; now Democrats can champion the same cause. Nor can the media afford to be on the side of the Old Corruption; it's bad for business. The wheel is turning, an important moment both sides of the Atlantic.

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