South Carolina Still Awaits True Ethics Reform

Operation Lost Trust nears its twenty-eighth anniversary, and the political corruption in Columbia is worse now that it ever was then. The problem is that simple bribery has been replaced by actual organized crime complete with a Godfather and those who serve him. Our ethics laws, moreover, simply addressed what happened last and not what was to come.

I authored the South Carolina Anti-Racketeering Act to fight organized crime by giving our law enforcement the same tool used by the FBI to tackle the mafia. Thirty-three other states have this law now. Members of both the House and Senate filed the legislation, and I look forward to hearings soon.

Political lobbyists, following Lost Trust, figured out that they could create a network of power if they served as "consultants" to candidates and elected members, oversaw their mail and fundraising, and charged them for polling. Successful operatives not only got paid (a lot) for all of this but also grew their political family.

Once a political family had enough members in the right places, the head of the family then could take on other "clients" with business at the Statehouse and take their money with the promise that the family members would act appropriately.

The most successful don, Richard Quinn, eventually became known as The Godfather. He served as the political consultant for several powerful members of the General Assembly and several members of the executive branch, including Lieutenant Governors, Attorneys General and others.

Quinn openly spoke of his "political family", and I imagine those words were emphasized when he spoke to non-elected clients such as SCANA and other large corporations from whom he extracted millions of dollars, also for "consulting".

Perhaps the most impressive feat occurred when Quinn engineered the election of his own son, called "Rick", to the House. The younger Quinn even became majority leader along the way and finished out his service (more on that later) as a member of the Ways and Means Committee--where the money gets spent. This political organization was known as the Quinndom, and it wielded tremendous power inside and outside the Statehouse.

Through a sequence of events generated by the corruption investigation of former Speaker Bobby Harrell, the Quinndom fell under the microscope of a special prosecutor who was named to the case because the original investigating agent, the Attorney General, is a Quinn "client."

The prosecutor uncovered a pattern of The Godfather taking money from special interests and then the elected officials whom he "consulted" acting in ways to benefit those clients. Some of them even admitted it in email.

This led the prosecutor to indict "Rick" and other family members. The prosecutor said that The Godfather "used legislators, groomed legislators and inspired legislators and others to violate multiple provisions of the state ethics act so they could all make money."

But the indictments were for "misconduct in office", a very vague and hard to prove standard. The prosecutor added charges of "criminal conspiracy", but the conspiracy pertains to the misconduct charge; again, vague and hard to prove.

My bill allows for the prosecution of the pattern of behavior, itself. That is the racketeering. Racketeering is at least two acts in furtherance or one or more schemes that have similar intents.

The bill also prevents a lobbyist from working for a campaign for two years and from ever being paid by any state agency. The bill further prohibits a former public official from ever serving as a lobbyist, and they would have to wait two years before working or serving another candidate's campaign.

More disclosure, more donation limits and even term limits are fine in and of themselves, and I support them. But, organized crime in South Carolina is smarter than that. We need the right tool for the job, and my anti-racketeering bill is the place to start.