5-11-2001

Trends. Conflicts about Conflicts of Interests in National Leaders

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

Recommended Citation

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Actual and aspiring leaders--e.g., Silvio Berlusconi who is running to become prime minister of Italy and Donald Rumsfeld who is the Secretary of Defense of the United States--have been involved in political controversy about potential conflicts of interest. In fact, governments that aspire to be labeled as representative democracies often attempt to do away with or at least limit conflicts of interests among their leaders. This is, perhaps, an admirable goal in the abstract but one that inevitably creates even more conflict than it may lay to rest.

A leader has a number of covert and overt psychological interests that impel the very quest for political leadership. To jettison these upon attaining leadership would negate that which renders leadership worth the expenditure of energy. Jettisoning psychological interests also would betray those who voted for the leader. In both cases, one would necessarily end up in the absurdist position of demonstrating no or minimal conflicts of interest by being unencumbered by any interests at all.

A leader also has a number of covert and overt material interests--especially investments. To demonstrate no or minimal conflicts of interest, the leader must engage in some combination of divestment, disinvestment, or blind trust. All three depend on the willingness, abilities, and motives of other people for implementation. And the leader can no more make leadership decisions that are not affected by knowledge about these people as could be made without being affected by knowledge of the self.

The counter to the above is that Caesar's wife must be above suspicion: even the appearance of misbehavior and of self-interest cannot be tolerated. Unfortunately, by virtue of being human, leaders can never avoid appearances and, indeed, thrive on them. Instead of a quest of infinite regression to tilt at the windmills of appearances, an informed citizenry should demand accountability for misbehavior in its leaders and see that enforcement occurs. (See Al-Hunaiti, M. F. (2000). Ethical strategies: Attitudes and perceptions of public employees in Jordan: An analytic study. Dirasat: Administrative Sciences, 27, 210-232; Howell, J., & Avolio, B. J. (1998). The ethics of charismatic leadership: Submission or liberation? In G.R. Hickman (Ed). Leading organizations: Perspectives for a new era. (pp. 166-176). Sage Publications, Inc; Myers, S. L. (April 25, 2001). Rumsfeld gets 90 more days to sell assets. The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com; Tagliabue, J. (May 7, 2001). Media barons dine in Italy. The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com; Sales, B. D., & Lavin, M. (2000). Identifying conflicts of interest and resolving ethical dilemmas. In B. Sales & S. Folkman (Eds.). Ethics in research with human participants. (pp. 109-128). (Keywords: Conflict of Interest, Leadership.)

1