

# California Commentary

## Welcome to Sacramento

By Jon Coupal

The opening session of the California Legislature begins this month with over a quarter — 34 out of 120 — of the members being fresh faces.

Term limits have guaranteed a constant flow of new blood to our state's lawmaking process. Generally, this is good news for taxpayers as these newly elected representatives are likely to feel more allegiance to the grassroots voters who elected them, than do the jaded veterans. For lobbyists for special interests, this changeover is bad news because they will have to begin a new campaign of indoctrination of the neophytes.

Recently, political strategist Dan Schnur summed up the workings of the system this way: "Every freshman class comes to Sacramento thinking that they're going to change the way business gets done here. What usually happens, though, is that Sacramento ends up changing them."

For those who don't know the drill — how a system can seduce the well-intentioned into collaboration — David Lean's classic Oscar winning film, "The Bridge on the River Kwai" is recommended viewing. In this fictionalized account of British POWs in Southeast Asia during World War II, Alec Guinness portrays the senior British commander who initially resists demands that he help the Japanese army construct a railroad bridge over the River Kwai. By the end of the film, he has become so caught up in building a bridge he sees as a monument to

the ingenuity of his men and himself, that he dies trying to prevent its destruction by Allied commandos.

Does this happen in real life? A few years back, one newly elected lawmaker returned to her district after two months in Sacramento to address a chamber of commerce breakfast meeting. Included in her remarks reporting on Sacramento was a telling statement that she couldn't believe how nice the lobbyists are.

Lawmakers new to the Capitol will find that everyone greets them warmly as if they were old friends. They will be recognized in the hallways, acknowledged on their birthdays, and, birthday or not, provided with a constant stream of small gifts like tickets to sold-out concerts or sporting events. They will receive invitations to desirable resort locations to confer on various policy issues, which will include opportunities for fine dining, tennis and golf, at no personal expense.

In short, they will be embraced with constant kindness. But this attention will not be from the voters who sent them to Sacramento. It will come from the permanent denizens of nearby office buildings, special interest lobbyists, the most successful of whom are oozing with charisma and salesmanship.

Sadly, many of the freshman lawmakers will succumb to believing that they have been elected to carry out the wishes of their new

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“friends,” and that their election is an opportunity to build their own noble “monument” to their stature and achievements. The concerns of those “shortsighted parochials” back home will be relegated to the back burner as an annoyance to be kept at bay with self-aggrandizing press releases and a program of well financed campaign literature, often made possible by the lobbyists they now serve.

Taxpayers may be as naive as new lawmakers, but we *still* hold out hope that some of these representatives will be guided by conscience and character, and continue to recognize their obligation to the folks who gave them the honor of representing them. We don’t necessarily expect or want dramatic headline grabbing policy initiatives — these are more often than not, intended to guarantee a political legacy rather than secure the common good. Many of us would be happy just to know that new lawmakers, and old, respect taxpayers who must work so hard to pay the state’s bills.

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