

Madigan Makes Another Misstep with “King-Maker” Comment

Written by Rich Miller

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The rich irony of Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan denouncing somebody for attempting to be a “king-maker” is so obvious and laughable that I can’t help but wonder why a guy who’s been a take-no-prisoners king-maker himself for so long in this state would ever think of saying such a thing.

You may already know the story. The Better Government Association and the *Chicago Sun-Times* took a look at some of Madigan’s campaign petition-passers to see if they had government jobs.

What they found wasn’t surprising at all. Seventeen of 30 people who passed Madigan’s nominating petitions worked for the government. Another 12 had at one time worked for the government.

Power tends to feed off itself. The longer you’re around, the more power you tend to have, and the more power you have, the more you can get. And Madigan has been around Illinois and Chicago politics forever. He is at the top of the heap as far as state-government power goes.

Ideologically, Madigan has moved with the times. He favors both medical marijuana and gay marriage, for example.

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Politically, the man is anything but modern. He’s the 13th Ward Democratic Committeeman, and he runs his ward like it’s been run for a century or more.

Running an old-time organization, however, requires old-style patronage, and Madigan is a master at finding jobs for his precinct workers.

A good case in point is Patrick Ward, a Madigan precinct worker. Ward was already drawing a public pension while working at Metra, but he wanted a raise and hadn’t received one, so he asked his sponsor for help. Madigan made a couple of calls, then backed off when the man who ran Metra objected to political interference. That guy eventually resigned with a golden parachute and a vow of silence. But when the media got wind of it, all heck broke loose and all fingers pointed to Madigan.

The investigation team of the *Sun-Times* and the Better Government Association (BGA) took a look at Madigan’s most recent nominating petitions, noticed Ward was a circulator, then took a look at the other names.

The BGA sent people to talk to the other circulators and see if they were the same folks who popped up on their government-employee searches. Some of those precinct workers alleged that they and their families were harassed, and Madigan got angry.

So Madigan unleashed a diatribe against the BGA and its leader Andy Shaw for being on “an unrelenting journey to become a king-maker in Illinois politics.” He also blasted the organization for trying to undermine the Democratic Party.

Madigan is fiercely protective of the loyal members of his 13th Ward organization, who are almost like family to him.

A statement simply denouncing the BGA’s tactics would’ve been reasonable, although still ironic considering how personally aggressive and “unrelenting” Madigan’s House campaigns can be.

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And some of the BGA’s political motivations and top contributors are also fair game. The group preaches political cleanliness, yet it doesn’t always associate with the cleanest of the clean.

But all Madigan did with that “king-maker” comment was turn the BGA’s Shaw into a folk hero and help Shaw raise lots more money. You’d think Madigan would comprehend the public consequences of such an over-the-top claim.

Word going around is that Madigan may also be trying to head off another ongoing BGA probe. But instead he might have whetted the group’s appetite.

The speaker has really been off his game the past several months. He literally ran away and hid from Chicago reporter Chuck Goudie a few months ago, which resulted in a humiliating story on the Chicago media market’s most-watched TV station.

He publicly tossed his own daughter under the bus after she blamed his resistance to retirement for her decision not to run for governor.

And Madigan insulted Senate President John Cullerton in May by telling a *Sun-Times* reporter that Cullerton displayed a “lack of leadership” on pension reform.

Partly due to his daughter’s aborted gubernatorial bid and partly due to the Metra “scandal,” polling has shown that the public’s awareness of Madigan has grown this year. And the public definitely doesn’t like the guy. So he’s only hurting himself and his members with stunts such as this BGA attack.

Madigan is valued at the Statehouse for being the most grown-up of the grownups. But he’s simply not acting that way lately.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com.