

Written by John W. Whitehead  
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*“By definition, these are closed-door meetings that are part of long-term relationships between the state’s highest officials and for-profit corporations. There is exactly nothing like that for citizens. This is entrenched, institutionalized, specialized access to political power in exchange for very modest contributions.” – Robert Weissman, president of Public Citizen, a citizen lobbying and advocacy group*

For four days, from July 12 through 15, America’s governors – hosted by Virginia’s Bob McDonnell – will gather in Williamsburg, Virginia, for the National Governors Association’s (NGA) annual summer meeting. While there, the governors and their staffs will be “treated to amusement parks, historical sites, championship golf courses, five-star dining, an al fresco concert, and a rousing fireworks finale,” much of it paid for by corporations eager to spend time with the nation’s most powerful government chief executives.

Among those footing the bill for the powwow, reports the Associated Press (AP), are “Procter & Gamble, Johnson & Johnson, and Northrop Grumman, the ubiquitous government and defense contractor that holds the largest state contract in Virginia history for a partnership to operate the state’s vast centralized information-technology system.” While the annual meeting is not open to the public, it is open to members of the NGA’s Corporate Fellows Program, whose roster is a who’s-who list of corporate America and whose mission is ostensibly to “promote the exchange of information between the private sector and governors and stimulate discussion among the Corporate Fellows on emerging trends and factors affecting both business and government.”

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As AP journalist Bob Lewis observes: “Few organizations offer as many attractive opportunities to interact with power as the NGA, and the organization in 1988 found a way to glean corporate-sector expertise and revenue for its Center for Best Practices with its ‘corporate fellows’ program. NGA spokeswoman Jodi Omear said the 100 corporations pay \$20,000 annually to participate. For their money, the corporations – including giants such as General Electric, Microsoft, ExxonMobil, Ford, Bank of America, and UnitedHealth Group – get the opportunity to help governors and their advisers ‘develop and implement innovative solutions to governance and public-policy challenges.’ ...

“Counting restricted and unrestricted gifts from the corporate fellows and other contributions, the NGA received nearly \$3 million in the 12-month period ending June 30, 2010, according to the organization’s most recent financial report.

“That’s enough to buy some corporate fellows a place at the table in Williamsburg. Literally. There are closed-door luncheons for corporate fellows Friday and Saturday, and the second power lunch gives them face time with senior advisers to governors – though not governors themselves – and NGA staff, according to the NGA weekend itinerary.

“Arrangements like that are why ordinary people feel the rules are written for – if not by – corporations, said Robert Weissman, president of Public Citizen, a citizens-lobbying and -advocacy group founded in 1971 and based in Washington, D.C.”

In this way, the NGA, a public-policy organization whose membership is composed of governors from 55 states, territories, and commonwealths, is not unlike the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which brings together state lawmakers and corporate representatives with a mutual interest in seeing legislation adopted at both the state and federal levels. ALEC operates by creating model legislation for state governments, much of which involves privatizing government functions or creating policies that favor corporate profits over public interest. For example, Arizona’s controversial immigration law started as an ALEC brainchild, as did the many voter-ID laws that have cropped up across the country in recent years.

No matter what kind of spin they put on their programs, however, for groups such as the NGA and ALEC the end goal is corporate profit at the expense of the American citizenry. As Bob Lewis, who covers Virginia politics and government for the AP, reports: “Corporate America gives lavishly to power and to organizations such as the NGA that can broker access for them.

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It's evident in the disclosures lobbyists in Washington and every state capital file about their dealings with government agencies, elected representatives, and senior officials in the executive branches."

What this shows is that the corporate buyout of the American political bureaucracy is taking place at every level of government, from the White House all the way to the various governors' mansions, and even local city councils. With Big Business and Big Government having fused into a corporate state, the president and his state counterparts – the governors – have become little more than CEOs of the corporate state, which day by day is assuming more government control over our lives.

The average American has no access to his or her representatives at any but the lowest level of government, and even then it's questionable how much really gets through. Never before have average Americans had so little say in the workings of their government and even less access to their so-called representatives. Yet one of the key ingredients in maintaining democratic government is the right of citizens to freely speak their minds to those who represent them; it is one of the few effective tools we have left to combat government corruption and demand accountability. But now, even that right is being chipped away by laws and court rulings that weaken our ability to speak freely to the politicians who govern us. For example, the Trespass Bill, passed by Congress and signed into law by President Barack Obama in March 2012, makes it a federal crime to protest or assemble in the vicinity of protected government officials, essentially creating a bubble zone around anyone protected by the Secret Service.

Making matters worse, politicians have gone to great lengths in recent years to evade their contractual, constitutional duty to make themselves available to us and hear our grievances. Just a few years ago, constituents might have had a chance to voice their concerns to their senators and representatives face-to-face at town-hall meetings. However, that is rarely the case now, with members of Congress attempting to avoid voter discontent by making minimal public appearances while at home in their districts, and only appearing at events in controlled settings where they're the only ones talking. If they must interact with constituents, they do so via telephone town meetings, impromptu visits to local businesses where the chances of being accosted by angry voters are greatly minimized, or by charging voters a fee to attend dinners or other events that limit the chance of personal exchanges.

Contrast this with the access enjoyed by corporate executives, lobbyists, and other members of the moneyed elite, and it becomes painfully clear that we no longer have a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Rather, the system of government under which we labor today is a government of the elites, by the bureaucrats and for the corporations. This

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political enterprise that passes itself off as a democracy is in reality little more than a “pay to play” banana republic, a plutocracy run by a powerful and corrupt oligarchy from the corporate, military and political sectors.

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