

Eric Bender

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Dr. Vavra

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The Best Government Money Can Buy

Many social and economic issues are explored in Edward Bellamy's 1888 novel *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*. In this novel the main character Julian West falls asleep in the year 1887 and awakens in the year 2000. West wakes up in a utopian society unimaginably different than it was when he last went to sleep. Of all the ideas Bellamy explores in his vision of the future one of the most profound is the elimination of money as we know it. Changing the role of money has innumerable effects on society. Julian learns in chapter six how the elimination of money affects politicians. Without money in its current form the American political landscape would be vastly different.

Chapter six begins like many in the novel with a conversation between Julian and Dr. Leete. Leete serving as Julian's cultural attaché to the strange new world he has found himself in. Julian is talking with Leete about the government of his day vs. the utopian government. When Julian mentions the corruption he was accustomed to Dr. Leete replies.

but all that is changed now. We have no parties or politicians, and as for demagoguery and corruption, they are words having only an historical significance (29).

Unfortunately the same cannot be said for the current state of affairs in Washington D.C. and in most state capitols. American politics still has parties, still has politicians, and in many cases demagoguery and corruption still run rampant. While talking with Julian Dr. Leete alludes to the positive aspect of the utopian money system, or lack thereof. Dr Leete says to Julian:

Nowadays, on the contrary, society is so constituted that there is absolutely no way in which an official, however ill-disposed, could possibly make any profit for himself or anyone else by a misuse of his power (29).

Dr. Leete reaffirms this by saying to Julian any official no matter how bad can't be corrupt because without money he has nothing to gain.

University of Illinois Professor Dr. Robert W. McChesney along with his writing partner John Nichols coined the term dollarocracy to describe the role of money in American politics. McChesney defines dollarocracy as “the rule of money rather than the rule of the people – a specifically U.S. form of plutocracy. Those with the most dollars get the most votes and own the board”. Dollarocracy has become so commonplace Americans just expect it. People accept it as normal without thinking twice (McChesney 1). In Bellamy’s utopia billionaires and corporations would not have U.S. senators and representatives in their pockets like they do today.

A secondary component of dollarocracy is lobbying. A generation ago former Mississippi senator John Stennis thought it would be inappropriate to receive donations from firms affected by his committee (McChesney 1). The congressional classes of today often see this as the main purpose of sitting on a committee (McChesney 1).

Once they have left the hill a frequent next step is a lucrative career in lobbying. Congressional members can easily earn a salary greater than or equal to what they made in congress (McChesney 1). Corporate lobbyists meet with senators and representatives during all phases of legislation affecting their clients. Lobbyists make sure laws are crafted the way the corporations want getting special privileges for the corporations along the way (McChesney 1). Lobbying may be different today than in Julian's time but it would not exist at all in Bellamy's utopia.

In Julian West's time at the turn of the 20th century, capitalists generally funded campaigns directly. Passage of the Tillman Act in 1907 banned this. Campaign funding by labor unions was banned in 1947 by the Taft-Hartley Act. Tillman and Taft-Hartley were a good start all though weak and not easily enforced. More comprehensive legislation would come 24 years later via the Federal Election Campaign Act. Effectively closing some of the loop holes and requiring more transparency of campaign funders than the two previous bills. A portion of the Federal Election Campaign Act was ruled unconstitutional this would eventually give way to a new generation of corporate election spending (Dunbar).

The 1971 Federal Election Campaign Act changed the way capitalists paid for elections. Part of this reform limited spending on campaign advertisements. The decision to limit ad spending was ruled unconstitutional (Dunbar). This precedent was observed by the U.S. Supreme court in their 2010 5-4 ruling in the landmark *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. The high court's ruling paved the way for unlimited campaign funding by corporations and ultra-wealthy donors by way of Super PACs. Illinois attorney Doug Rohrman had this to say about the court's decision:

The practical effects of this ruling will not be felt overnight; more likely, uncontrolled corporate campaign spending will be slowly assimilated and perhaps insidious in its impact on US politics, both at the Federal and State level.

Super PACs are a special type of Political Action Committee. Traditional PACs are severely limited in their campaign contribution amounts and individual donor limits. Super PACs have no limits to the amount of money they can spend on campaigns or the amount donated to them ("What is a PAC?"). Although super PACs cannot give money directly to a candidate they can spend as much as they see fit on his or her campaign (Dunbar). Super PACs are used primarily to finance two of the largest expenditures in any given campaign, media advertisements and direct mail ("What is a PAC?"). Once purchased media ads and direct mail are used to advocate for or against their chosen candidate (Dunbar). Generally this money is used to buy increasingly negative attack ads on radio and television (Dunbar). In the three years since the Supreme Court ruling 1,310 Super PACs had raised over 828 billion dollars. Super PACs spent more than 609 billion dollars in the 2012 election cycle alone ("Super PACs"). Campaign spending of this magnitude would make the capitalists of Julian's time proud.

In the 1888 novel "Looking Backward" Edward Bellamy envisioned a utopian society far removed from the social issues of his day. Changes in government, money, education, social classes, and labor structure created a society to be envied the world over. None of these changes would ever be implemented with the current system of government in place; a government where our elected officials dance to the tune of

corporations and their lobbyists. A system where said corporations can spend as much as they please to ensure the ones elected will do their bidding. Unless changes are made Americans and our government will continue to be under the thumb of capitalism.

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