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Character Is Supposed to Count

J. B. Pritzker's infamous toilet bowl scandal reveals just how cheesy and fraudulent one person can get.

The billionaire years ago bought the mansion next door to his lavish Gold Coast digs, apparently not for anyone to live there, but as a tax dodge. By removing the toilets, the home was declared uninhabitable, which lowered its value, and substantially reduced its property tax.

How much did Pritzker save? An estimated \$330,000. That's enough for some of us to buy a home. But for someone who's worth \$3.6 billion — reportedly America's richest politician — \$330,000 is chump change.

But he did it anyway, so for a brief while wags in the press began calling him "Governor Toilets."

Pritzker eventually paid. But what does this say about his character? A fraud? Cheat? Greedy? Keep in mind that his scheme cost taxpayers. While your share of the \$330,000 would hardly be noticed, in this single act, Pritzker has revealed a gross disregard

of the public interest. A way to dump his personal expenses onto you and me. Didn't he already have enough money?

In Pritzker, Illinois voters thought they finally had found a true-blue, likeable, honest candidate. Illinois could hold large parades of convicted political grafters, boodlers, chisellers, and similar bottom feeders.

An heir to the Hyatt hotel fortune, Pritzker had never been indicted or convicted of corruption. With all that money, he naturally would not be steering friends and insiders to generous government contracts, would he? What could possibly go wrong?

Quite a lot, it turned out. To appreciate how Pritzker's character influences his Democratic Party policies, we must take a look at some not-so-interesting political stuff that may be boring to anyone used to corruption. Skip ahead in this book if you already know all this.

Ethics Reform

Everyone says they're for ethics reform. A government that isn't being looted certainly is more effective. And so, Pritzker boasted: "We've passed and I've signed ethics reform," celebrating as if world peace had arrived.

In compliance with our old "The Illinois Way," his reform didn't change anything at all. It prompted

Legislative Inspector General Carol Pope immediately to resign. It makes her a “toothless tiger,” she said. Years of mostly Democrat Party control has made “ethics reform” in Illinois no more than a game of “Let’s Pretend.” Yes, Illinois Republicans have shared in the boodle, but the main beneficiaries during the last, maybe seventy, years have been Democrats.

Gerrymandering

In Republican states, Democrats typically accuse Republicans of drawing legislative districts that favor the GOP. In Illinois, Democrats have this gerrymandering down to a fine art that has insured Democratic Party control of the state for many decades. Republicans have been reduced to an almost-ineffective small minority.

However, Pritzker, during his campaign, “pledged” to veto any map featuring lopsided advantages for anyone. “Fair and square J.B.”

Old-time politicians probably were laughing behind their hands at the fantasy he could single-handedly undo something so entrenched in Illinois politics. So, when the Democratic-controlled legislature passed a map with most of the old inequities, did Pritzker (A) veto it as he promised or (B) sign it anyway? Of course, the answer is (B).

Corruption

No more tolerating Illinois's legendary political corruption. Honest to God, Pritzker promised this. A few months after his pledge, the Feds – not Illinois law enforcement, of course – indicted Democratic House Speaker Michael Madigan, arguably the state's most powerful politician and the nation's longest serving state-house speaker.

As the evidence piled up signaling the upcoming indictment, Madigan resigned, but *not* at Pritzker's urging. The governor skipped a "good riddance" comment for all the destruction the state has suffered under Madigan's autocratic hand. Instead, Pritzker proclaimed in a statement, "The people of Illinois have much to be grateful for thanks to [Madigan's] dedicated public service."

Loyalty to the party is the coin of the realm for Illinois Democrats, not so for loyalty to you, the citizen of Illinois. It's a far cry from, for example, the distinguished, straight-arrow Democrat, former Illinois Lt. Governor Paul Simon, a man too honest to be allowed by his party ever to become governor, I am guessing.

The Budget

Perhaps Pritzker's biggest whopper was his claim that he has "balanced" the Illinois budget. Well, not just balanced it, but he came up with a \$1.7 billion surplus. This for a state with one of the worst credit ratings,

largest accrued debts, and its vendors — especially our state’s hospitals — often stiffed with bill payments months and even years past due.

Wow, that was big news for a state that hasn’t balanced its budget since 2001. How, did Pritzker and his pack of Democrat legislators pull off this miracle?

The Illinois Policy Institute unpeeled that claim. It turned out the budget failed to mention a thing or two. Among them was the huge deficit from last year. You can’t pretend that this obligation just — poof! — disappeared. When you include the huge deficit from the previous year, the IPI said, the budget was \$1.5 billion in deficit.

What Pritzker *did* include is the one-time \$14 billion in federal pandemic aid from taxpayers all across America. But that’s a one-time payment and so the next year, Illinois will be back in the red.

Never mind that. Pritzker’s TV ads boldly and dishonestly suggest that the governor fixed the state’s unique and huge financial problems. Shame and honesty aren’t his strong suits. In my forty-plus years as a Chicago journalist, I’ve met true reform politicians in both political parties. Pritzker ain’t one of them.