Blagojevich trial's bright side? Ethicist sees Illinois politics as darkly humorous.
By James Janega
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To begin with, says Tom Carson, a professor of philosophy and an ethicist at Loyola University Chicago, "campaign financing, it seems to me, is just a form of legal bribery, anyway."

I called Tom to see what ethics professors see when they look at the Blagojevich trial, with its web of pay-to-play allegations, runaway fund-raising, bartering for important government jobs, all close to being proved or disproved in court. News organizations, and people like you who read our stories, are wrapped up in the wrapping up of this case. (Here's how the courthouse looked to a Tribune reporter Monday.) We're focused on the moment, not the longterm effects, at least for now.

It's compelling. And at the moment -- one way or another -- there will be a resolution to this stage of the Blagojevich case. It's going to end.

Or is it our state's ethical albatross?

Carson wasn't painting a pretty picture of our ethics-challenged state. "I think we're something of a banana republic," he said.

He built his case -- one weaving ethics, moral and actual harm, a dysfunctional government and odd behavior in the street outside the federal court building downtown. Carson's closing argument? A surprise twist taking place in the hallways of the Loyola Department of Philosophy.

A serious moral question

"Harming people is a serious moral question. There are some things which create harm and others that don't," Carson said. A collapsing state budget -- that's real and tangible harm, he pointed out. A jury doesn't need to decide on it, and a governor, guilty of a crime or not, is still a party to it -- though there are others, too, he pointed out.

Abusing an official position

Soliciting a bribe? That's an alleged harm, but for the sake of argument, Carson offered that "to have a bribe you have to have some kind of official position, and take it (the bribe) in return for doing an official duty."
Depending on what you think about what you've heard from our federal court coverage so far, we can put that down as a "maybe." And anyway, it's the jury's turn to make a decision. If you live in Illinois, you've had your chance to vote for or against Blagojevich.

**Complicit in Buffoonery**


"He's a buffoon. He's very funny," Carson replied. "Rod's carrying on our tradition in Illinois, and you should follow the moral code of your time and place, and so he did that. This is what's going on in Illinois. Rod got caught, was a buffoon and funny. But there's lots of pay-to-play in all levels of government, and we shouldn't kid ourselves about that."

This is where Carson brought up the campaign finance system that, in his ethical calculus, measures up as tantamount to bribery. "There are lots of people who do things that are legal that are still bribery. We've created a system where to be viable, you need to do that. And that's pretty terrible."

Then Tom offered something cheerful, by switching to Philosophy Department shop talk.

**Petition**

"We have a lot of fun joking about Rod," Carson said. When out-of-state friends sent greeting cards over the holidays, after watching the national news or reality television, they asked what had become of the state. Carson said his department just decided to roll with it, by offering tongue-in-cheek ethical defenses for our former governor's behavior. They came up with the "everyone else is doing it" and "moral code of your time and place" arguments.

They passed around a petition, he said.

"For him to run for President. Twenty-nine signatures are on it," he said proudly. Really? From budding ethicists? "We've paid people a dollar or two to sign it. We have a fund for that. I funded it. Often people would sign it, but if they balked, I'd say 'how much would it take? A buck? Two bucks?'"

"I probably spent $20, but I've got 29 signatures," Carson said.

Why not, he figured. It seemed to be the thing to do.