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America's Newest Citizen - John Q. Corporation

A Newspaper Column from Evan Barrett
July 2014

On the Fourth of July the old red, white and blue looked a little more tattered compared to the past.

Thanks in great part to the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS), John Q. Citizen, the human being citizen who is the bedrock our unique experiment in self-governance, is being replaced by John Q. Corporation.

We anointed our citizens with many rights and protections: free speech and the right to assemble; freedom from unreasonable governmental search & seizure; the right of self-governance anchored by the right to vote.

We promised that our government would not impose religion and would not interfere with the practice of any and all religions. And, we sought to provide to the citizen the opportunity to earn a living for himself and his family by honoring and rewarding the value of his labor and even his capital.

Then we created a legal vehicle – the corporation -- through which he could, by investing his money, participate in commerce with some protections.

People – citizens – invested in corporations, but corporations were not people, corporations were not citizens.

But, rights of human citizenship are now repeatedly being given to corporations by the current SCOTUS, while at the same time the rights of individual American citizens are being eroded or eliminated by that same court.

It seemed laughable when Mitt Romney declared that “Corporations are people, my friend.” But we are increasingly seeing SCOTUS and various appellate courts hell-bent on giving citizen rights to John Q. Corporation while cutting back on your rights as John Q. Citizen.

First case in point: voting rights. Just one year ago SCOTUS' declared that the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had achieved its goals and voter discrimination and suppression had ended. Since then an all-out assault of voting rights and extremely restrictive voter suppression measures emerged all across the country. Today, across America, voting is much more difficult.

Contrast that with SCOTUS' decisions in Citizens United and other cases where corporations not only have “free speech,” but their money is their free speech and corporations are entitled to spend an unlimited amount to influence elections. Hundreds of millions of dollars each election cycle now purchase the best Congress and State Legislatures that money can buy, often in anonymity. SCOTUS actually threw out Montana's corporate campaign restriction that was passed by Montana voters in 1912 and had worked well for over a century.

So SCOTUS has made it harder for John Q. Citizen to vote while enabling John Q. Corporation to purchase the electoral processes of America.

The latest affront was last week when SCOTUS declared that John Q. Corporation can now have religious beliefs that can control the right of John and Jane Q. Citizen to access certain forms of reproductive health care.

I fully subscribe to the protection of each individual's religious freedom rights and recognize that sometimes those rights, uniformly applied, often lead to conflict. It's been said that my freedom to throw a punch ends at your nose. But this recent SCOTUS decision addressed that inherent conflict by unbelievably empowering the corporation itself – a non-human legal artifice -- to have religious beliefs.

The elevation of John Q. Corporation over John Q. Citizen continued.

As I look at our slightly tattered flag of citizenship I can only hope that John Q. Citizen will someday be restored to his place of honor and respect in our country.

Evan Barrett of Butte, has spent the last 45 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.