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Backsliding into Corporate Dominance?

A Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett
September 25, 2014

I recently dropped in on the annual gathering of the remaining delegates to Montana's 1972 Constitutional Convention. The Constitution these heroic Montanans crafted made Montana the envy of other states. As time takes its natural toll and we lose more of these champions of the people, we also are in danger of losing much of what they accomplished as today's power elites seek to reverse the progress these great Montanans helped make.

To understand Montana's progress requires knowing the point from which we were progressing. From its beginning as a state, Montana was dominated economically and politically by powerful interests. That was the price of out-of-state capital coming into the state. Montana historians tell us that economic and political power flowed out from the state into the hands of non-resident capitalists and corporations. Eventually, "The Anaconda Company" and its friends ran the state. Policy was determined in New York City. Control of the press was rigid. Anaconda's corporate dominance in Montana's political affairs was unique in American history. For its first 75 years, Montana was a one-company state, unlike any other.

Against that background, Montanans struggled to make things better for themselves. Through two progressive eras – a half century apart -- they created rights for themselves and found ways to reduce the influence of the powerful.

In 1904, Montana became the first state to pass child labor laws for children under 16 and passed the 8-hour workday. In 1912, by peoples' initiative we limited campaign spending including a complete prohibition on corporate money; and we let voters rather than the legislature elect our US Senators. In 1914, Montana women got to vote before it became a national standard. Then, after a period of complete Anaconda Company dominance, in 1924 Montanans rose up and enacted by initiative a metal mines tax to make mining companies pay their fair share for the first time.

But then "The Company" and its allies tightened the Copper Collar around Montana's neck for another 40 years until a new progressive period began. Between 1965 and 1980, big change occurred as the people transformed Montana from a corporate colony into a free, modern state.

That period of progressive change empowered the people. The Executive Branch of state government was reorganized into less than 20 departments under the control of the Governor, reversing nearly a century when nearly 200 uncontrolled boards, bureaus and commissions made it easier for Montana's private corporate interests to exercise control.

The Legislature was modernized with a staff and a Legislative Council, Fiscal Auditor and a Fiscal Division. Legislative votes were recorded and made public and no longer did Anaconda Company-paid attorneys draft the bills for the Legislature. Single member legislative districts brought the elected Legislators closer to the people.

Montana got more flexible and empowered local governments; a fairer tax structure; open and transparent government including open meetings and open records; more participatory selection of judges and strong judicial and lawyer standards; more recognition of workers' rights; a strong right of privacy; and the right to a clean & healthful environment.

Women emerged in that period with rights under the law and increased political power. Constitutional equal rights for all were established. More up-to-date campaign reform laws were passed. And the corporate-sponsored and financed effort to put a regressive general sales tax on Montanans was strongly rebuffed at the polls because it was seen as a massive tax shift from corporations to little people.

At the conclusion of those two progressive eras, a half century apart, Montanans were in charge of their own destiny. But the economic and power elite have not gone quietly into the night. They continue to fight back, both here in Montana and nationally. The US Supreme Court has essentially declared corporations to be citizens and unleashed unlimited money into the political arena to allow the wholesale purchase of our Democracy. The "Best Congress Money Can Buy" continues to reward the rich and punish the poor, creating an economic climate that destroys the middle class. In Montana their efforts to drive corporate tax obligations down to zero and eliminate any regulation at all are combined with efforts to make it more difficult for people to vote.

With enough money and today's advertising and communications vehicles, the uber-rich and the large corporations buy their own version of the truth and often convince many regular folks to vote against their own interests.

We citizens of Montana should be alert and informed when we enter the polling booth or fill out our absentee ballots. Look past the advertising, public relations and the rhetoric. Look closely at the candidates and think about who is paying for things and ask "why."

Honor those 100 Montana Constitutional delegates who carved out a new and better Montana. Do that by being informed; by knowing where we came from and what we have gained; by voting in the interests of the people, not the powerful; considering the weak, not the wealthy.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte, hoping that before Montanans vote, they think of the progress we have made and are in danger of losing.

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.