



## PACleanSweep Opinion

by Russ Diamond  
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### **Bonusgate: A Tsunami for Reform**

In 2005, the legislative pay raise was a seismic disturbance that rumbled beneath the surface of Pennsylvania's political ocean. In 2006, the electoral effects were felt in what was commonly dubbed a "political earthquake." Three years later, the resultant tsunami - otherwise known as Bonusgate - has finally come crashing to shore.



Citizens should applaud the agents of the Attorney General's office and members of the grand juries. The volume of man-hours apparently involved in pouring through mountains of records and testimony to reach this point is astounding. That the investigation continues and more arrests are likely is even more breathtaking.

The biggest accolades, however, must be reserved for the people of Pennsylvania and their historic reaction to the pay raise. Absent the intense citizen activism during the 2006 election cycle, Bonusgate would not even be a blip on the radar.

Although the grand juries found that the intermingling of campaigns and legitimate legislative functions began prior to 2006, the sheer number of electoral challenges that year created an opportunity for the practice to be utilized to an extent that commanded the attention of the media and law enforcement.

Without pay raise outrage, the practice might have quietly remained behind the scenes for years to come. Without pay raise outrage, journalists might not have had the editorial foresight and ripe audience required for stories that grow "legs." Without pay raise outrage, law enforcement might not have felt compelled to launch such a substantial investigation.

Under grant of immunity, one individual involved in the scandal nailed it: the pay raise "changed the whole map."

Bonusgate should spur aftershocks from voters for the same reasons the pay raise did. Both incidents arose from the fault line of arrogance and greed that unfortunately runs directly beneath our Capitol's dome. For some, apparently, the weight of incumbency is simply not enough advantage in the ongoing fight for power and personal privilege.

Despite gerrymandered legislative districts, the availability of free media coverage for legislative work during re-election season, the ability to dole out public funds, taxpayer-funded newsletters and public service announcements, certain individuals within at least one caucus viewed retaining their positions and gaining a majority in the House of Representatives as objectives that reside above the law.

Although the recent revelations are likely just the first phase of the tsunami,

Pennsylvanians must begin considering the cleanup and rebuilding efforts now. Clearly there are instances of individual abuses, but many of the problems of Harrisburg are rooted in the structure of government and inherently systemic.

Will further internal legislative rule changes be enough? Will stronger statutes and threats of stiffer penalties prevent such activity in the future? Can any legislative body effectively police itself, or should Pennsylvania tackle the Mother of all Reforms - an objective constitutional convention where sitting public officials are prohibited from serving as delegates?

These questions can only be answered properly if Pennsylvania's citizens are informed, actively engaged in the process, and honest about both the mistakes of the past and the challenges that lie ahead.

As the waters from the Bonusgate tsunami retreat back to the proverbial sea, some parts of the political infrastructure in Harrisburg will have crumbled while others remain standing. Those that remain standing will have been built on the solid ground of the law, ethics and accountability. It is these principles that will guide us in finally ending Pennsylvania's crisis of confidence.

[Constitutional Convention Enabling Act \(SB1290\)](#)

### **About PACleanSweep**

*PACleanSweep is a non-partisan effort dedicated to reforming state government in Pennsylvania. For more information, please visit [www.PACleanSweep.com](http://www.PACleanSweep.com).*