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EDITORIAL

Paying for power in Albany

Local protestors have been calling the CPV natural gas power plant under construction in Wawayanda, in effect, the wrong plant, at the wrong time, in the wrong place. Last week, a federal prosecutor said there was a whole lot more wrong with the project.

U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara, who has made a career convicting corrupt state legislators, turned his attention to the executive branch, charging eight people with corruption involving business development in the state. Among them are Peter Galbraith Kelly Jr., a former top executive of CPV who allegedly arranged for more than \$315,000 in payments and gratuities to Joseph Percoco, also named. He is a close friend and former “right-hand man” to Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who allegedly sought and accepted bribes to help make the CPV project happen.

Bharara alleges that Kelly, Percoco and Todd Howe, a consultant to CPV, engaged in a “multiyear bribery scheme” going back to 2010, whereby Kelly arranged for Howe to make secret payments from CPV to Percoco in return for his official assistance to the company. The bribes allegedly included creating a \$90,000-a-year, lowshow job for Percoco’s wife, who was not named in the complaint.

Percoco’s help appears to have been significant. He is said to have convinced a top state official to reverse course and approve an agreement with CPV to buy cheaper power emissions in New York that could be applied to a plant it planned to build in New Jersey. Percoco also is said to have promised to use his influence to help CPV gain an agreement with New York to buy virtually all the power the

plant generated for 15 years. That would have been worth about \$100 million and make it significantly easier for the company to get financing for the plant. The complaint alleges that even when it was obvious the agreement was not forthcoming, Percoco kept promising to use his influence so that CPV would keep his wife on the payroll.

The governor said, if the allegations are true, he is “saddened and profoundly disappointed.” That’s understandable, given his close relationship with Percoco. However, the prevailing feelings locally are anger and betrayal and Cuomo needs to do something about that. All work at the CPV plant needs to be halted immediately and whatever governmental agencies state and local that have been involved in the permitting process need to suspend their approvals and the entire process reviewed by an independent agent.

Kelly has been fired by CPV and Howe has pleaded guilty and is cooperating with authorities. Percoco’s lawyer says his client did nothing illegal, but Bharara’s record of convictions on corruption speaks for itself.

It’s simple. The “pay-to-play” culture that has infested Albany erodes confidence in government. Bribery bespeaks a lack of confidence in one’s project to stand on its own. Combined with extortion, it suggests a cavalier disregard for the law. What other corners might have been cut?

The CPV Valley Energy Center is a 650 megawatt natural gas-fired power plant off Route 6 in Wawayanda. Health and safety are primary concerns. Without trust, it cannot be allowed to proceed.

ANOTHER VIEW



ANOTHER VIEW

Robert Downey Jr. honors the American Way

By Jonathan Bernstein
Bloomberg View

Let’s talk celebrities and politics. Joss Whedon (creator of the “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” TV show and director of the two blockbuster “Avengers” movies) has formed a pro-Clinton PAC with \$1 million of his own money and is producing a series of videos with big Hollywood celebrities. The first one urges voters to register to vote and features movie and TV stars including Avengers Robert Downey Jr., Scarlett Johansson and Mark Ruffalo.

Meanwhile, Donald Trump campaigned Tuesday with boxing promoter Don King and former college basketball coach Bobby Knight, while many are traveling to Ohio on behalf of Hillary Clinton.

No, voters aren’t going to base their vote choice on what some actor or sports hero tells them to do. The celebrities doing these things, whatever their intentions, are probably doing more to promote themselves than to promote their candidate. At best, the direct effects are really small.

On the other hand, it’s not as if very many people are going to switch away from Clinton because actor Clark Gregg likes her, or away from Trump because reality star Omarosa supports him. So it’s unlikely any of this does any harm to the candidates.

And collectively, it’s probably true that these sorts of things are real cues to voters who aren’t particularly interested in politics that, hey, there’s an election coming! For some of us, the election has been going on forever and we’re counting down the days until it finally ends — but for many other Americans, politics is sort of a droning background noise most of the time, and they only really pay attention in last few weeks of the campaign.

That might be more helpful now than it was in the old, pre-internet days of three broadcast networks and a public television station. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, it was harder to be isolated from big political news. So it’s not that any one particular ad does much, but collectively these things do eventually remind people that it’s time to pay attention.

My real defense of celebrity participation in politics, however, is that even if it has no effect at all it’s still good, healthy fun.

In particular, over the last two or three decades the U.S. has become a nation with more patriotic rituals that evoke its military (such as flyovers at sports events) rather than those which are centered in democracy as the core of the nation. With all due respect to the military, this should dismay us. The U.S. should be proud of its democracy, and that means (among other things) celebrating elections, which are symbolically (and to some extent substantively, although that’s more complicated) the central action of a mass democracy.

Which seems to be what Whedon’s celebrity-studded video is all about: registering to vote and voting. I’ll choose to interpret the celebrities’ message not as the elitism of famous people, but as one of participation for everyone. And that’s worth celebrating.

—Jonathan Bernstein is a Bloomberg View columnist covering U.S. politics.