

## **THE WETA-DNC PARTNERSHIP**

By William Nicoson

WETA, our most illustrious public television station, has admitted publicly that for years it has exchanged donor lists with the Democratic National Committee, thus enhancing the fund-raising capacities of both organizations. What's more, The Washington Times last Friday quoted WETA spokesperson Mary Stewart to the effect that this policy "has not been a problem for us", and will be reevaluated only if it's "a concern to people on both sides of the aisle and to our members."

The insouciance and arrogance of that attitude took my breath away. Maybe WETA trustees and lawyers reacted the same way. Within hours after the Times' story appeared, WETA adopted a new policy precluding donor-list trading with political organizations.

WETA is operated by a tax-exempt, D.C. non-profit corporation, and its programming sponsored by the Public Broadcasting Service is subsidized in part by Federal tax dollars. The Internal Revenue Code prohibits tax-exempt organizations from intervention or participation in political campaigns of (or against) candidates for public office. The IRS has ruled, for example, that a tax-exempt broadcasting station which provides equal time to all candidates is not engaged in prohibited partisan political activity. Unfortunately for WETA, it did not afford to the Republican National Committee the same access to donor lists afforded the DNC.

Grasping at straws, WETA claims it swapped donor lists with two organizations known for conservative agendas, Patriotic Veterans and Great American Republicans. Alas, neither group functions as a political party.

It would be unusual if WETA's Articles of Incorporation omitted the standard prohibition against political campaign activities which tracks the language of the tax code. Thus WETA's long-standing policy of assisting DNC fund-raising would appear to contravene not only tax law but the proscription of its own Articles. Investigation of the tax code violation will be the duty of the IRS under supervision of the Treasury Secretary. Investigation of corporate conduct which may be "ultra vires" (beyond corporate powers), will be the duty of the D.C. Corporation Counsel.

Since donors on the WETA list may have contributed to the DNC and since such contributions may have been used to assist the political campaigns of the present D.C. Mayor and the present U.S. President, it's anyone's guess how energetic these investigations may prove to be.

Once again the voracious appetite of the DNC for political contributions has sullied the reputation of trustees of public policy. At the Commerce Department, trade mission seats have apparently been awarded for DNC contributions, and at the White House, bankers making or likely to make generous DNC contributions have been treated to coffee with the Controller of the Currency. WETA is the latest victim of DNC greed.

It's ironic that disclosure of WETA's fund-raising partnership in past years is likely to undermine WETA's fund-raising in coming years.

Does all this mean that WETA's programming is biased in favor of positions adopted by Democratic candidates? Not in my judgment, but that claim has been made before and will be renewed in the light of the WETA-DNC collaboration. WETA's reputation for independence has been severely compromised. Can the taint inflicted by the DNC be erased? Not anytime soon.

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