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## Realistic reform

With Rod Blagojevich headed to trial, other scandals brewing and the 2010 primary rapidly approaching, it's a near lock that the Legislature is going to pass something labeled "ethics" before it escapes Springfield for the summer. But what and, more important, how real will it be?

A caucus room full of blue-ribbon panels and the like has unleashed a storm of reform proposals in recent weeks, with another batch due this week from Gov. Pat Quinn. Lawmakers haven't yet tipped their hand, but I fear that the really important stuff will get lost amid all those 28-point programs.

Remember what happened last fall. That's when a key piece of legislation limiting big cash donations by state contractors to those who hand out contracts passed — because it was simple and easy and had the stage all to itself. The pressure built under then-presidential candidate Barack Obama, who in turn lit a fire under state Senate President Emil Jones, who finally let the bill out.



In an effort to replicate that, I've talked to reformers and politicians, prosecutors and some of those they prosecuted to come up with at least a semi-refined list of reforms they say make sense and can pass. Here it is.

The first is limits on contributions to any state candidate, based on current federal limits.

I have my doubts that limits would work — water always finds another way to seep in. But retired uber-prosecutor Pat Collins, who co-chairs Mr. Quinn's panel, notes that 46 states already have some kind of limits. "Every major prosecution I've been involved in had a campaign-finance problem at its core," Mr. Collins says, a fact no one ought to take lightly.

That having been said, with last year's law on the books, the biggest problem isn't individual contributions to individual lawmakers but funding that is hidden and washed via a legislative leader's campaign committee.

If Senator Smith is dumb enough to take \$100,000 from someone who wants his help, the donation is going to come out and someone likely will eventually connect the dots. But if the money goes to a committee run by Smith's majority leader, who passes on the dough months later, it will be almost impossible to connect the dots. That's why clear, smallish (under \$10,000 a year) limits on transfer payments from one political committee to another are crucial.

Doing so also will include a fringe benefit: Legislative leaders will have less power over their members and how they vote if they don't control most of their members' campaign funding. Frankly, a little independence would be nice in Springfield.

In the same vein, campaign contributions need to be reported in near-real-time — not just in semi-annual reports, which is the case most of the time now. Make all the reporting and record-keeping electronic, and let the public in to look as soon as the data are available. That is transparency.

Transparency also requires a good cop at work to bust those who won't go along. That's why the Illinois Board of Elections needs enhanced enforcement and penalty powers — and quite possibly more resources. A candidate who doesn't comply with disclosure laws needs to have his or her wallet drained.

I'm not convinced that changes in state procurement laws make much sense. "Just about all the stuff that Blagojevich is accused of doing procurement-wise already was illegal," says Charles Wheeler, director of the public affairs reporting program at the University of Illinois at Springfield. What might work is returning auditors to departments, rather than centralizing them in an outside agency, he says.

Three other things I think are critical: First, as I've argued before, move the primary to some date

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other than early February, which only protects incumbents. Ban third-party payments, "finders fees," "lobbying expenses" or whatever else you want to call it for those seeking state pension-fund business. And give public financing a pilot test in some judicial races, because justice ought never, ever be for sale.

That's the list. We'll see what we get.

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