
Casino debate gives crook the moral high ground

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HERE'S HOW upside-down the debate over casino gambling in Massachusetts has become: The moral high ground has been claimed by a disgraced political kingpin who was just convicted of selling his office for a pile of pocket lint.

Former House Speaker Sal DiMasi used to be the most powerful politician in Massachusetts. Now he's facing a stiff prison stretch for steering a pair of crooked software contracts to a crony's firm, while pocketing \$65,000 for his troubles. Federal prosecutors want to send DiMasi away for a dozen years. That would be the stiffest political corruption sentence a federal court has ever handed out in this state.

DiMasi's lawyers are seeking a much lighter three-year sentence, reasoning that their man may be a thief, but at least he's a thief with a heart of gold. And at least he's not trying to foist slot machines onto John Winthrop's Commonwealth, which is more than can be said for DiMasi's former State House colleagues.

The publicly funded DiMasi legal defense didn't have much to work with at trial, and it still doesn't. DiMasi's lawyers couldn't deny that the former speaker lined his pockets with cash from a Canadian software maker, because a stack of cashed check stubs said otherwise. They tried selling a jury on the notion that the \$17.5 million in state contracts DiMasi steered to the company had nothing to do with the monthly checks DiMasi was cashing, or the \$850,000 that found its way to DiMasi's friends. The jury didn't buy that story. So now the former House speaker is trying to trade his progressive politics for a light sentence.

The three-year prison bid DiMasi wants is less than the 42 months former state Senator Dianne Wilkerson got for accepting \$23,500 in FBI bribes. It's equal to what Boston City Councilor Chuck Turner got for taking a \$1,000 bribe, and then mouthing off to the US attorney's office.

In a lengthy memo filed late last week, the former speaker's legal team fought his extortion conviction with a dizzying array of needy North End old-timers, long-suffering environmentalists, health care policy buffs, stem-cell scientists, and gay-rights advocates, all of whom had nothing but lovely things to say about DiMasi. They said the gregarious Boston pol deserves credit for being a thief who always voted the right way and cajoled others into following suit (as far as the voting goes, not the thieving).

It's no accident that casino gambling figures prominently in DiMasi's request for a light sentence. Gambling is the one policy area where even a disgraced crook can conceivably stake out some moral high ground. His sentencing memo recounts how gambling addiction wreaked havoc in his family. He stared down media derision and physical threats and defied a casino-hungry governor, the memo says, in order to spare other Bay State residents from the fate his father suffered. For that, his lawyers argue, DiMasi deserves leniency.

DiMasi is asking federal district Judge Mark Wolf to partially excuse the selling of DiMasi's political office, since the same office that was sold was also used for some good. It's an audacious request. The sentencing memo also notes that, on the same day prosecutors put forward their 12-year sentencing recommendation, DiMasi's successor unveiled Beacon Hill's latest plan to legalize casinos; now, since DiMasi is off to prison for fraud and extortion, he won't be able to rescue the state from the scourge of gambling, because, it says, "The fight has been lost as a voice has been stilled."

Pleas about noble legislative deeds couldn't save Dianne Wilkerson and Chuck Turner, and they're unlikely to save DiMasi from a long prison stretch. He dirtied up an office that was far more powerful than the ones Wilkerson and Turner occupied, and took more cash along the way.

Still, there's no small measure of irony in the sight of a convicted crook trying to win his freedom by decrying a crooked enterprise, and actually being right. At best, casinos tap into cash that's already being spent in the economy, diverting it into the coffers of moneyed interests. And at worst, it profits from addiction. None of that

means that DiMasi shouldn't go to jail. But if it was thievery he was after, he clearly got into the wrong business.

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