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Lying for Litchfield

by Rushworth M. Kidder

They seemed like such small things. One company supplied a new ceiling for the summer cottage. Another worked on gutters and drainage. Some friends donated a water heater and a stepping stone for the front stoop. Others gave a hot tub. All were gifts. No money changed hands.

None of this would have been remarkable except for three details:. The recipient was John G. Rowland, the governor of Connecticut; the cottage on Bantam Lake in Litchfield was his private property; and the governor admits he lied about the source of funds for these renovations, concealing the fact that the companies were contractors bidding for work from the state and that some of the friends were state employees.

That Gov. Rowland's office is now swirling with controversy is not surprising. Five Connecticut newspapers have called for his resignation. Federal authorities, already investigating allegations of corruption in his administration, last week subpoenaed records on construction work at his official state-owned residence in Hartford. The legislature is eyeing the feasibility of impeachment.

At issue is the appearance, and perhaps the reality, of bribery and self-dealing. Did the contractors understand this work as mutual back-scratching, where doing something nice for the governor would be repaid in handsome state contracts for their firms? Did the individuals see a spa or a flagstone as a cheap way to curry the governor's favor?

In a statement released last month -- seemingly candid but possibly artful -- Gov. Rowland denies a quid pro quo. "None of the people mentioned above received any benefit from my office or the state in exchange for their assistance," he said. "Nor did they ask for any such benefit."

Fine. But did he himself *offer* future benefits without their asking? And does the offer still stand even though nothing has yet been "received"? On that point his statement is silent.

Rowland's supporters, no doubt, will snort at such linguistic nitpicking, arguing that the intention of his language is clear even if its syntax is flawed. Maybe so. But in an age when an impeached former president of the United States can famously argue about what *is* is, one needs to keep up one's grammatical guard.

The large, shaggy question here is, How could this happen? What causes an effective politician -- re-inaugurated last January as the longest-serving Connecticut governor since colonial times -- to put everything at hazard for a few thousand dollars? Is it genuine penury, as he tries to support a wife and five children on a governor's salary? Is it the exercise of raw power, where through a wink and a nod he can influence the decisions of others? Is it just friendship, scattering the perks of office among those he likes?

Or was it all a ghastly mistake, in which he had no clue to the significance of his actions? If so, what does that say about his awareness of the importance of ethics? Can he really have come this far without recognizing that his position would bring hourly moral temptations? Was there never

any conversation around his office about the difference between accepting *de minimus* gifts (a plastic ball-point pen, a cup of coffee) and receiving something worth more than a few dollars? Did he dismiss government ethics as "soft stuff" that need not concern him? In recent years, this kind of gift policy has become so commonplace in the public and private sector that it would be astonishing if he were ignorant of it. Was he, then, blind to its application to himself? Or was his a more deliberate hypocrisy -- privately holding himself above the law while publicly claiming to be its principal guardian?

Sadly, he's not alone among politicians under suspicion these days, especially given the 18-count indictment for fraud and racketeering handed up last month against former Illinois Governor George Ryan. But there are better models to follow. When Maine Senator George Mitchell chose not to run for reelection in 1994, one reason was that, after years of public service, he needed to bolster his retirement finances by working a while in the private sector. His candid articulation pointed to a core distinction between the United States, where politicians *resign* to acquire wealth, and some other nations, where they get rich by *remaining* in office.

This is not one of those nations. If Gov. Rowland wanted to renovate his cottage with free gifts from politically connected friends, he first needed to step down. Afterwards, by joining a private consulting firm, he could have handsomely bolstered his personal portfolio. Now, given the patchwork of deceptions surrounding him, that time has passed. With trust eroding on every side, and even his grammar under scrutiny, he's learning a hard lesson about this "soft" subject: Once compromise your ethics and nothing else you ever do will be entirely free of suspicion. It's such a small thing, with such massive consequences.