

MY TURN JAMES SHEEHAN

Passage of ethics reform great news for R.I.

Nine days ago the General Assembly finally passed legislation to give the Ethics Commission jurisdiction over the 113 members of the Rhode Island House and Senate.

That means, come Nov. 8, when you go to vote, there will be a question on your ballot asking you if you want to amend the state Constitution to hold your legislators fully accountable to the state Code of Ethics.

Ethics reform was not just a bill, but a journey. While it has taken us seven long and arduous years to get ethics reform written into law, I am very pleased that the day has finally arrived.

In a 2009 Supreme Court decision, members of the General Assembly were effectively rendered immune to Ethics Commission jurisdiction and the state Code of Ethics for conduct within their core legislative duties. At that time, the court decided that the Ethics Commission passage was in contradiction to a clause in the constitution guaranteeing legislators free “speech in debate.”

So, the constitution had to be changed.

The seven-year effort to return the jurisdiction of the Ethics Commission over the General Assembly

was initiated by my dear friend, the late Sen. Michael Lenihan. Mike knew that integrity matters both personally and publicly. Our government needs to possess integrity in the eyes of the public. People need to have confidence that their government works for them, not just the well-connected.

Humans are imperfect beings. As James Madison famously wrote in the Federalist Papers, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.”

We all need rules to check our behavior as well as a mechanism to hold persons accountable for unethical behavior. Reinstating the state Code of Ethics over members of the General Assembly will encourage members to listen to the better angels of their nature, whose voices remind us all that the nobility of public service resides in placing the common good above self-interest. When lawmakers do this, we are at our best in making a real difference in the lives of others.

This ethics amendment is a good and sound measure. I firmly believe that it will help us restore a modicum of the peoples’ trust in their elected assemblymen and women. In light of recent events, this amendment could not come at a better time.

There will always be the bad actor — the lawmaker with a reckless disregard for the law who perverts the system he or she is sworn to uphold. And no question — when that lawmaker is rooted out, he or she should be shown the same amount of regard that they showed the people of Rhode Island. But since we’re judged by the company we keep, every time it happens, it casts a pall over those who are doing the job honestly and forthrightly.

And that’s why this amendment is so important. It will ensure that someone else — an independent Ethics Commission — will be keeping a close watch on lawmakers, helping to make sure that they act in the best interest of the public. With that assurance in place, the public can have increased confidence that the members of the General Assembly will address the challenges that lie ahead with a renewed focus on the common good.

Once again, I’d like to thank the people who made this possible — the Senate and House leadership and all my legislative colleagues. And I, of course, urge everyone to vote yes on the ethics amendment on Nov. 8.

— *James Sheehan is a Democratic state senator from North Kingstown.*