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Politics of self-interest

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Even though the next Baltimore city election is more than a year away, early hysteria has many council members in its grip.

Anticipating Mary Pat Clarke's challenge of Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke, some members are angling for the council president's job. Others are vying for an expected vacancy in the comptroller's office, whose occupant, Jacqueline F. McLean, is about to stand trial on corruption charges.

This scramble has caused a climate of selfishness in which alliances constantly shift and members are motivated by calculations of short- or long-term gain. None of this bodes well for the city because it means that council behavior is guided neither by principle nor by good public policy.

Councilman Martin O'Malley has now taken cynical advantage of this rivalry. Perceiving a wave of sympathy toward Jacqueline McLean among the general public as well as his colleagues, he wants to overturn the charter revision commission's recommendation that would transfer the real estate division from the comptroller's office to the Department of Finance -- where it rightly belongs.

"I really saw this as a ruse to rob the house, when the owner wasn't in it. It was a power grab," Mr. O'Malley said.

Sorry, councilman, you are wrong.

After two-and-a-half years of deliberations, the charter panel formulated its recommendations long before Ms. McLean was under investigation for any possible wrongdoing.

In fact, there has been a clear trend in the past three decades to weaken the comptroller's powers. That has had nothing to do with the office holder. Rather, those moves -- beginning with the removal of the budgetary process from the comptroller and the creation of a separate Department of Finance -- grew out of a conviction that fiscal processes were best handled by experts.

Although a good case could be made for abolishing the comptroller's office altogether, the current panel, headed by retired Court of Appeals Judge Harry Cole, decided against such a drastic move. Its members felt that the comptroller, as a voting member of the Board of Estimates, would provide healthy balance to a board that otherwise is dominated by the mayor's appointees.

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As the City Council takes a final vote Monday on the charter package, we urge members to reject Mr. O'Malley's amendments. The real estate division does not belong in the comptroller's office, whose main function should be performing audits. Indeed, keeping that function there could easily cause future conflicts of interests.

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