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The political pulse

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Legislative limelights . . .

Lobbyists dominate governmental process

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The Association of Idaho Taxpayers recently took time to issue a statement of the tremendous amount of lobbying of state legislatures and U.S. Congress is done by or on behalf of, other units of government.

The AIT president, Russell Westerberg, went on to say "In fact, the average taxpayer might be shocked to learn that not only are organizations of governments lobbying other organizations of government, in many cases for higher taxes, they are doing so with taxpayer provided funds."

The AIT comments that "state and national organizations of county governments are typical examples of how tax dollars from different sources are used in every step of organizational progression to support the lobbying of government."

It cites the National Association of Counties receiving funds from individual counties, including counties in Idaho. These same counties in Idaho also pay dues to the Idaho Association of Counties which among other things does lobby the State Legislature.

This is a good point raised by the AIT but it's something like the pot calling the kettle black because the AIT, although not tax-supported, is one of the most active lobbying organizations at the State Capitol. It has a full year around office staff to conduct its affairs.

It's very name, the Association of Idaho Taxpayers, is a misnomer. It gives the impression it is supported by the rank and file of the taxpayers when actually it is financed largely by the big business firms and corporations.

Westerberg, a former Democratic state representative from Soda Springs, is extremely well versed in the various facets of government and does an excellent job in seeing that the vested interest of the big corporations and companies are well protected.

The AIT gives some examples on the huge amounts of money some public agencies spent to further their interests. It shows that taxpayers are paying for the lobbying of governments by government.

Westerberg excuses the private lobbyists with such a statement: "Private interests do represent their concerns and desires through a variety of ways, including providing information and entertainment to members of Con-

gress, State Legislatures, etc. Communication with members of Congress via private interest and professional lobbyists is an important and integral part of the democratic decision making process. In order to be responsive to the electorate, government must hear from the governed."

That's a fine statement, but it's not the rank and file of the people of the so-called governed who are heard. It's the vested interest.

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This often raises the question of who represents the lowly average taxpayer? There are highly paid lobbyists in behalf of the large business and industrial interests, and many associations, such as the The Idaho Association of Commerce and Development, Idaho Public Employees Association, Idaho Education Association, Idaho Mining Association, Idaho Forest Association, and many others along that line.

It's understandable then that the legislators are under considerable pressure from the lobbyists. It's no wonder they succumb to enact legislation that is frequently not in the best interest of the people, or worse yet, fail to pass laws that would help the public.

In every legislative sessions for at least the first third of half of the session, the lawmakers are hosted to a series of dinners, parties and other events almost nightly. By attending these, the legislators place themselves under certain obligations, although many prefer to close their eyes to that.

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Actually, it's the daily newspapers for the most part who set themselves up as guardians of the public by reporting the news and also some of the shenanigans that take place under the marble dome of the State Capital.

There are other unselfish and public-spirited groups which strive to work for better government but they are ill financed, or not financed at all. Their influences are hardly of such magnitude as to sway legislation. In this category can be placed the League of Women Voters, the American Association of University Women, and Common Cause.

Lobbyists perform a certain service in bringing attention to problems but the figures they furnish are generally badly slanted to help the groups or business interests they represent. Eternal vigilance is needed by the public so that it is not short changed by these self serving lobbyists.