

▶ Best of all, they hold out the promise of employment when public service ends. Nearly half of all congressmen who left office between 1998 and 2004 went on to become lobbyists, according to Public Citizen, a watchdog group.

Egregious examples of the revolving door are not hard to find. The Bush administration's chief climate-change official, for instance, was a former lobbyist for big oil companies and recently left the White House to work at Exxon Mobil. Similarly, Billy Tauzin, who headed the congressional panel overseeing the pharmaceutical industry, took the reins of the drug-makers' lobbying group as soon as he left office at the start of 2005.

Under current law, members of Congress and senior aides must wait a year, after stepping down, before lobbying their former colleagues. Even if this "cooling-off" period is extended to two years, as one bill suggests, it will hardly change the behaviour of legislators who know where their next pay-cheque is coming from.

One of the most potent and cunning lobbying tactics of the past decade, grassroots campaigning, will also probably escape oversight. This secretive hybrid of telemarketing, data mining and spin-doctoring is used to generate public support for otherwise unpopular corporations caught in a legislative battle. Pharmaceutical companies, for example, tried to fend off regulation of their prices by mobilising black church groups, who were told that the proposed law was racist. Congress is still considering whether to require these lobbying-by-proxy campaigns to disclose their operations, but it is unlikely.

Congress has also had a terribly difficult time deciding whether to curb the lavish trips and free meals that lobbyists hand out. Mr Abramoff famously took lawmakers on a golfing trip to Scotland in exchange for favours. Most lobbyists, showing more subtlety, get their corporate

employers to send congressmen, their aides and sometimes their spouses on hundreds of "fact-finding missions" a year, many of them conveniently near a golf course. Senators and leading House members also make frequent use of corporate jets for campaign stops. Neither House nor Senate has touched that.

As for campaign-finance reform, forget it. One of the latest tricks to evade limits on donations is to give money to politicians' "charities" (thinly veiled campaign vehicles), in exchange for promises. Congress is continuing to turn a blind eye to this as well. The House bill merely restricts fundraising by so-called "527" groups, whose money goes chiefly to Democrats.

There is agreement at least on one thing: a mandatory ethics-training course for registered lobbyists and House employees. Congressmen themselves are "encouraged" to attend. As long as it does not conflict with lunch plans, of course. ■

Gay rights

An unequal world

WASHINGTON, DC

Government workers find benefits for partners are thin on the ground

IF THE partner of Bruce Knotts were a woman, or even a dog, Mr Knotts might not be leaving the Foreign Service, where he has worked for 22 years. But since his partner is Isaac Humphrie, the State Department will not provide him with health insurance (as it does for heterosexual partners) or pay for his relocation to whichever embassy Mr Knotts is sent to (the department pays for relocation of heterosexual partners and pets, though only up to \$3,000 for the latter). So, at the end of May, Mr Knotts will be starting a job with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), an NGO that does both.

Mr Knotts's flight to IRC—one of about 8,000 companies and organisations in the private sector that offer domestic-partner benefits—illustrates a growing trend. Private employers, keen to recruit and retain the best workers regardless of their sexual orientation, are providing gay workers with the workplace rights and benefits that the federal government, and many state governments, deny them.

Under the Defence of Marriage Act, passed by Congress in 1996, federal law recognises only marriages "between one man and one woman". Even in Massachusetts—the only state where, since 2004, gay marriage is legal—a person who marries a government employee of the same sex cannot receive federal health benefits. By the estimate of the government's General

Accounting Office, this is just one of 1,138 federal rights and benefits for which only heterosexual married couples are eligible—both on and off the job.

Some states have helped to narrow the gap in workplace rights and benefits between gay and straight workers. For instance, if Coloradans approve a domestic-partnership referendum which the state's legislature has just put on November's ballot, 14 states and the District of Columbia will, by the end of this year, provide domestic-partner benefits to government employees (generally, only gay couples can register with the state as domestic partners). But, on the other hand, 18 states have amended their constitutions to ban gay marriage. And conservative lawmakers in two of these states—Ohio and Michigan—are suing public employers who offer domestic-partner benefits to gay workers on the ground that this violates their constitutions' ban on "marriage-like" relationships.

As well as Ohio and Michigan, nine other states proscribe marriage-like arrangements in their constitutions. Seven more states have anti-gay marriage referendums on November's ballot; in five of them, "marriage-like" relationships would be banned as well. Anti-gay marriage activists in Colorado and Alaska are trying to get referendums on the ballot too.

Even if the courts in both Michigan and Ohio rule that public employers cannot provide domestic-partner benefits to gay workers, "it's very unlikely" that this would mean private employers in those states could not do so either, says Carrie Evans, the state legislative director at the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), a gay-rights group. This means that gay workers' employment opportunities in the private sector should continue to grow. In 2004, Mellon, a consultancy, surveyed a diverse sample of employers—in terms of size, industry and site—and found that, though only 9% of them were legally required to provide domestic-partner benefits to gay workers, 31% of them did, up from 10% in 1998. The HRC reports that about half of the Fortune 500 companies offer them.

Mr Knotts's troubles with the federal government, however, will not end when he joins the private sector. Ask Nancy Frye who, shortly after she married her partner in 2004, enrolled in her spouse's employer-provided health plan. She thought her spouse would not have to pay federal taxes on spousal health benefits; after all, heterosexual married couples do not have to. "I'm not a domestic partner", Mrs Frye reasoned. "I'm married." That may be so in Massachusetts, where Mrs Frye and her spouse were married and live. But not under federal law. In early 2005, the IRS notified Mrs Frye's spouse that she would have to pay taxes on the roughly \$6,000 her employer spends on her partner's health benefits each year. ■

