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TEXAS PUBLIC INTEREST ORGANIZATIONS

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Working Paper 90-32

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**SPEECH BEFORE THE MEETING OF
TEXAS PUBLIC INTEREST ORGANIZATIONS**

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David Cohen

Speech Before the Meeting of
Texas Public Interest Organizations

Austin, Texas

September 16, 1990

I.

I am delighted to be here with you tonight for lots of reasons. A visit with Texas public interest participants provides additional sources of energy for this Washington hand. Your feistiness, your sense of battle and engagement provide a marvelous tonic to those of us fighting battles in Washington. You know how to draw lines in the dust.

There are other reasons for my jumping at the chance of being here. At the Advocacy Institute we believe there is much to be learned from how advocates wage public interest campaigns. We chronicle issue campaigns seeking to capture their lessons, what our crowd and our opponents do well and poorly -- how the argument is organized, how the resources (knowledge and financial) are marshalled, how the public interest side gets its public message across with little financial resources. We are the side without money. My colleague and partner Michael Pertschuk has written two engaging books on this -- Giantkillers and The People Rising, how the people's effort to retain their Constitutional values come about by stopping Robert Borks' confirmation. What Mike has done (with Wendy Schaetzel as co-author of the People Rising) is pass on the core craft learning and skills of issue leadership.

You should be applauded for putting yourselves through the pace of seeking to learn and understand from your past activities, successful actions and mistakes and hearing from some who are friends that can be frank.

You are doing something else in this conference in addition to getting away from your-in basket. You are working at creating a community of public interest advocates who will make the effort at sharing, arguing, and listening. That's worth it because it can lead to setting agendas, changing situations for those stomped on and connecting citizens to a generic politics of public interest life that doesn't shy away from conflict and creates a climate of engagement.

Tonight I want to talk about the public interest movement in the 1990's, its place in a troubled American politics with its two tier system of participants and those who have withdrawn. In

political adversity; it has matured and in the process has learned to survive losses. It no longer expects easy victories. But there is a caution: being accepted as a participant does not guarantee a future spot at the table. The public interest world has to renew and earn its place on a continuing basis with the American people if it expects to influence to be respected and its mission acted upon.

Expecting a guaranteed place at the decision-making table is the fastest route to oblivion. In understanding the reality of our pluralism, the public interest world has to lift itself beyond the pursuit of specific agenda items and endeavor to ensure access through an even playing field. Otherwise some parts of the American population are left out of participation in our public institutions. They will not be represented at the table. Building a politics of inclusion by tackling the class system stand out as the central challenge for the public interest world.

The classic interest-group conflicts -- labor management, regional occupational -- are not likely to be the dominant factors. Instead, sharp conflicts between age groups (children and retirees), or public institutions (city hospitals, public housing) and vendors, illustrate likely future clashes.

Americans have to resolve any generational conflict between a focus on younger people, starting even before birth, and a commitment to the quality of life of our retirees who will grow in numbers and live longer. We must not ignore the potential for conflict between in-place Americans and immigrants newly arrived on our shores. These are conflicts that all Americans face. Of course the public interest movement does not serve as a substitute for leadership from other sectors in our society-political, private, and voluntary. Only if these sectors pull together do we have a chance of dealing with these overarching problems. The public interest world, now that it stands as an acknowledged participant in the political and policy systems of the United States, must accept its responsibility for a stake in fostering agreement that stresses our economic and social responsibility to each other.

Overcoming the two-class system of participants and nonparticipant requires the public interest world to join in a common effort at improving the instruments of self-government so that they are effective and accountable. That is only one part of the two-part effort. The other requires placing our highest values on public service and our responsibilities to each other and to our community. Building a common public purpose taps our idealism and gives all Americans a chance at shaping their own lives.

There are five compelling ideas that will help move us as a

The steps necessary to dismantle the secrecy apparatus include strengthening the Freedom of Information Act by ending the evasive denials of information, overhauling the classification system, protecting whistle-blowers, ending and disseminating vital government information, including information on hazardous products and toxics. Information, its accessibility, retrieval, and dissemination, can serve as the great equalizer in the 1990s.

Children and the Future. The statistics about children are familiar: one in four is poor, one in five is likely to be a teen parent; one in six has no health insurance; one in seven is a high risk for dropping out of school; one in two has a mother in the labor force, but only a minority have safe, affordable, quality child care. By our actions we can let children and youth know they have a stake in our society and that we accept our responsibilities of one to the other. We have much to overcome. Since 1981 many low-income entitlement programs have been hit harder than any other part of the federal budget. Since the beginning of the decade, health, education, job training, housing, and other services for low-income families including children have been cut in half.

The constraints placed by Gramm-Rudman-Hollings leave unanswered the question of future revenues. Absent any serious address of the issue of revenues by elected officials, the matter of new initiatives in vital areas will be abandoned to inertia. If politicians are to levy tax increases, they must know they have the support of critical constituencies. The public interest world can do more than it already has to address the revenue question. Among constituencies that represent higher-income professionals, the public interest world has shied away from distributional questions, except to pinpoint tax-avoidance abuses and systemic defects. The linkage of tax payments to higher public purposes requires addressing the revenue question directly.

A full-scale assault to overcome the years of neglect requires infusions of public monies if we are to battle infant mortality, provide affordable and quality child care, ensure access to health care for children in a timely way, and end the real conditions of hunger and homelessness. We will invest in children only if we face our priorities directly. We are reducing our military budget but we are not tackling the deficit problem, or reducing our interest payments on the deficit. If we avoid levying taxes for public purposes on those who can afford to pay we, as a country, abandon children who are born poor, denying them a decent chance of leading independent and fulfilling lives. The consequence of abandonment is that it robs the country of talent-talent that would pursue with relish the American dream of opportunity.

Poland and multiple movements in Hungary, celebrate. Tolerance and respect for individual autonomy; civic virtue; the bonds of community; the respect for law; and, above all, empowerment through democratic participation.

In each of the American cases there were leaders who recognized that any serious campaign, whether to halt a weapons system or strengthen a civil rights law, must accommodate and aggregate diverse interests to forge a majority. Therefore, they practiced a politics of outreach, of inclusion, and of bridging to diverse and even unlikely allies.

There were leaders who understood that the intensity and commitment of "outside" nongovernmental organizations, grass roots movements had to be married to effective "inside" leadership within the legislature or executive. Bearing witness, and purity of motive were not sufficient engines of social change.

Such leadership does not view negotiation and compromise as contaminating. It accepts the value of incremental, as well as apocalyptic change. And it's prepared to engage in all-out democratic conflict where others are unexpansive or unbending.

There is a diverse taxonomy of leadership roles within the broad democratic leadership umbrella and each role is critical is critical. There must be intellectual leaders, spark plugs of knowledge and ideas.

- o There must be networkers, reaching out and drawing in diverse webs of other groups and activists.
- o There must be mobilizers of resources, those who work through large organizations, able to cut through institutional inertia.
- o Some must serve as the voices of public morality, latter-day counterparts to the prophets of old.
- o Others must carry historic memory, bringing to bear the learning of past experience.
- o There must be conveners and facilitators, those who bring people together comfortably and cut through resistance to get the job done.
- o There must be communicators, helping to recognize and seize the opportunities, and avoid the pitfalls, presented by the mass media.
- o And there must be at least a few whose leadership skills are multi-layered.

The most effective citizen leaders are characterized by personal qualities and values which support these roles. They are good listeners, good communicators. They value diversity, and leaven their judgments of both allies and adversaries. They function not to divide, but to aggregate; to build bridges among

those from pro-choice and pro-life, who have agreed to disagree on the legality of abortion but are working to identify common areas of agreement in pre-natal, medicaid, adoption and child care issues. If it happens it will be a powerful force for change. What's important is to invest the effort at trying.

Movements don't just happen; the energy that underlies them must be marshalled, channeled, and focused. The principal means by which this is achieved in our society, and within our political tradition, is through advocacy networks and coalitions. At its simplest, an advocacy network is nothing more than the communication and cooperation of individuals who share a personal dedication to advancing an issue. Yet many of the most significant public policy initiatives have been achieved by a handful of citizen activists of "sparkplugs" who may work closely, but who are linked together only by their common commitment and determination. Successful networks encompass simple virtues: good leadership, outreach, mutual trust and sharing.

The term "coalition" encompasses a great diversity of institutional and individual alliances formed to advance a common goal. Coalitions can be formal or informal; permanent (dedicated to a complex, long-term agenda); they may be funded and staffed independently or collectively. Coalitions are essential to broaden support for a policy initiative, and to coordinate effective action to accomplish a common goal.

Time spent in a coalition is often the best of times and the worst of times of any advocacy effort. Coalitions expand the numbers and expertise of those working on an issue; they can unite unlikely allies and bridge essential gaps. When effective, coalitions mass and focus the collective skills, resources, and energies of their constituents. When ineffective, they can drain energy and resources, exacerbate institutional and personal rivalries and conflicts, paralyze flexibility, and deaden initiative.

Coalitions are inherently fragile. It's in their nature to be slow and cumbersome, and achieving agreement on even minor objectives can be time-and energy-consuming. And that can hamper the coalition's ability to respond to crises and opportunities. Group rivalries inevitably erupt, along with the understandable reluctance of organizations and individuals to subordinate their individual identities to the coalition. Hard feelings can fester and grow, especially when some groups or individuals work harder than others, and still others show up in time for the victory celebration to claim an unfair share of the credit.

A strong movement needs networks and coalitions, working sometimes separately, and sometimes together. Each has its own strengths and limits. Networks are fertile grounds for the

The public interest world, when it deals with the demonic interests that undercut its specific agenda item, too often down-plays the work of individuals. What people accomplish in pushing the battle forward, what happens to them as they practice civic participation by seeking elective office or accepting appointive office-these warrant a recognition of sparkplugs.

3. Frame the symbols of the debate. As a greater number of Americans receive their information from television news, the public interest world necessarily will have to include as part of its strategy what symbols it will convey in its public fights. Symbols have their limitations. They are not synonymous with advertising slogans or jingles. Symbols must convey a fact-supported message that will withstand critical scrutiny. A perfect example of failed symbolism is the Reagan administration's effort to portray Robert Bork as a moderate in outlook for judicial philosophy. The record clearly indicated otherwise..

The Children's Defense Fund presents a skilled use of symbols in its campaign for access to quality child care and health care. The symbols defuse attitudes toward welfare recipients, perceived by many as lazy. These symbols present material that focus on helping disadvantaged youth to become self-sufficient taxpayers. This responds to what concerns Americans most and gives efficacy to the Children's Defense Funds's primary goals.

Operationally we need to pay as much attention to the nurturing and support of democratic nongovernmental leadership, including grass-roots, community based leadership as to the support of policy professional elite.

If we are fortunate enough to acquire enlightened government leaders "on the inside" they will need to build consensus through partnership with enlightened "outside" leadership.

- o We can serve as talent scouts for emerging issue leaders who embrace the values critical to essential democratic change.
- o We can strengthen our understanding and skills in such essential tools as gaining access to and managing critical data, coalition building and networking, media advocacy, lobbying.
- o We can facilitate convening of citizen advocates of diverse issues but shared democratic values, helping to cure their insularity and facilitating the enrichment and global reach of the essential human networks. This can be done at state and local levels.
- o We can develop relationships between experienced public interest advocates and entry level leaders.

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