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THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

OPINION

From the issue dated December 13, 2007

The Long-Term Perils of Aggressive Advocacy

By William A. Schambra

It may not have been unusual to hear Jennifer Howse, president of the March of Dimes, delivering a radio address supporting the extension of the federal Children's Health Insurance Program.

But it was surprising that her speech was the formal Democratic Party response to President Bush's weekly radio address.

If champions of increased advocacy by nonprofit organizations have their way, such direct involvement in government affairs will become more common. Yet it might be wise for nonprofit groups to consider first the long-term consequences of this activity for those whose interests they advocate.

The speech by Ms. Howse is but one of many signs of increased public-policy advocacy by nonprofit groups and foundations. The American Cancer Society has pledged to devote its entire annual advertising budget of \$15-million this year to the consequences of inadequate health coverage. And the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Broad Foundation have committed \$60-million to ensure that education policy is a prominent issue in the 2008 presidential race.

When critics raise questions about nonprofit advocacy, they usually focus on concerns that nonprofit groups will wander too close to the zone of overt partisan activity, which is off-limits under regulations governing charities and foundations. That seems unlikely, however, with organizations like OMB Watch, the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest, and the Alliance for Justice supplying concise, accurate, and accessible guides to nonprofit advocacy, featuring detailed advice about effective advocacy campaigns that remain well within the law.

Along with such advice, those organizations properly remind us that advocacy by nonprofit groups has often been the sole means by which poor and marginalized groups have been able to mobilize their political energies, permitting them to voice their own concerns and shape their own programs in the face of indifferent national elites.

Supporters of greater nonprofit advocacy, however, need to deal with a deeper concern. Regardless of what cause a foundation or charity focuses on in its advocacy efforts, the most consistent message throughout is more: more government presence, involvement, or regulation, typically involving more new government programs or more spending for existing programs.

Given that government support is a substantial portion of the budgets of many nonprofit organizations, it is hardly surprising that they



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should push for more.

A survey of nonprofit groups engaged in advocacy described in the new Aspen Institute volume *Seen but Not Heard: Strengthening Nonprofit Advocacy*, written by Gary Bass, David Arons, Kay Guinane, and Matthew Carter, notes that 86 percent choose "promoting government policies that support our mission" as a reason for advocacy, with 77 percent choosing "protecting government programs that serve our clients, constituents, or community."

But is it wise for nonprofit advocates to commit themselves so enthusiastically to extending the reach and size of government? Even with anti-big-government conservatism on the wane, the Gallup poll reports that Americans now "express less trust in the federal government than at any point in the past decade," with only 47 percent of Americans reporting at least a "fair amount of trust in the federal government to handle domestic problems."

Nonprofit groups need to be conscious of the deep, prolonged public disenchantment with the institution to which their fates are increasingly tied.

Greater advocacy by nonprofit groups also poses the threat of drifting away from the mission that animates many of them in the first place, namely, standing for the interests of the poor and marginalized.

Once an organization secures substantial support from a government agency, it naturally becomes leery of biting the hand that feeds it.

Acting as a sentinel for the poor, goading recalcitrant government agencies to refine and improve their programs, gives way to placating the bureaucrats who dispense the money, and joining them in lobbying for more of the same.

As one nonprofit director reported to the authors of *Seen but Not Heard*, "high dependency on government contracts changed the culture within the organization," since it became "increasingly focused on protecting the government revenue to the point of downgrading the importance of advocating on behalf of the clients."

As organizations plunge more deeply into public policy, they encounter other distractions from their missions. They may envision politics in which they make unilateral demands for their constituents while keeping themselves aloof from distasteful logrolling and quid pro quo paybacks. But that's not the way it works. Politicians always expect something in return.

It may take the form of a request to support projects dear to the politician but far from the organization's mission; expectations of campaign contributions and after-hours electoral support from an organization's staff and board (as private individuals); suggestions for inappropriately favorable coverage of the politician in the group's public-relations material; or even subtle pressure to provide jobs or consulting contracts to his or her friends and supporters.

Just like other pressure groups, nonprofit groups will be expected to

make political trade-offs that will chip away at their claim to speak for everyday citizens and the poor.

The growing tendency for charities to become more concerned about organizational survival than their constituents' welfare only compounds a disheartening civic trend described by the Harvard sociologist Theda Skocpol in *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*.

She maintains that America once sustained nationwide organizations that attracted widespread membership and civic engagement from vast numbers of Americans, including poor and excluded people. But in recent decades, she notes, involvement in public policy has shifted from mass-based membership organizations to nonprofit groups whose members (if any) are expected only to write checks to the headquarters in Washington, where expert lobbyists will make a compelling, professional case to legislators.

"Because today's advocacy groups are staff-heavy and focused on lobbying, research, and media projects, they are managed from the top, even when they claim to speak for ordinary people," Ms. Skocpol argues.

In fact, it is much easier for advocacy organizations to formulate and pursue a coherent policy agenda by consulting only a handful of policy experts and key donors, rather than trying to mobilize mass opinions and actions.

Consequently, says Cynthia Gibson, an adviser to numerous foundations and a supporter of nonprofit advocacy, it appears likely that "a significant percentage of these mostly D.C.-based groups are less interested in championing the concerns of grass-roots citizens — especially poor and low-income people who are traditionally underrepresented in the policy-making processes — largely due to their increasingly heavy reliance on affluent donors who have other priorities."

The decline of one of America's largest and most successful nonprofit organizations provides a cautionary tale. The National Congress of Parents and Teachers (more commonly known as the PTA) boasted 12 million members during the 1960s. Today, its membership may be half that. Although some scholars attribute this fall to the general decline in civic engagement, critics note that it has been aggravated by the PTA's growing focus on national advocacy across a wide variety of educational and social programs.

Over time, they argue, national advocacy has displaced the more immediate and local concerns of everyday parents within specific schools. Tim Sullivan, whose *PTO Today* magazine covers the world of school parent-teacher groups and sprouted in response to the increase in groups without ties to the PTA, suggests that parents are particularly troubled by the PTA's "insistence on making public-policy advocacy the heart of its mission," when in fact they're most interested in "making their local school a great place."

If nonprofit groups embrace greater advocacy without thinking

carefully about the tension between organizational survival and genuine democratic engagement, they will slip into cozy relationships with professional lobbyists, bureaucrats, and politicians, whose interests soon displace those of the poor and dispossessed.

Thoughtful proponents of grass-roots advocacy are aware of this tension. As Francis Kunreuther, director of the Building Movement Project, recently told the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, while "it's important that we demand the support we deserve from government and other sources," we also "have to make sure we have a broader vision that extends beyond organizational survival and truly promotes democracy."

It would be sadly ironic if the push for more advocacy simply contributed to the conversion of nonprofit groups from engines of widespread civic engagement to highly centralized and professionalized lobbying groups, with only the most tenuous of ties to those for whom they claim to advocate.

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