

Style Plus

Focus

Advocates
For ActivismBy Don Oldenburg
Washington Post Staff Writer

Last Thursday morning, Will Collette got a desperate call from Spokane where citizens and city council members have been engaged in a bitter fight over the proposed construction of a giant incinerator with a \$134 million start-up price tag, near the airport. Frustration was immobilizing what had been a high-spirited public campaign against the proposal, the caller glumly reported.

But since successfully suing late last year to block the incinerator issue from appearing on a referendum ballot (the case jacket read: The City of Spokane versus the Voters of Spokane), the caller said, the council has grown deaf to the voice of the people—at least on this issue. It has ignored lingering questions about the incinerator's potential threat to the environment and likely interference with air-traffic patterns. It has disregarded a poll indicating that an overwhelming majority of residents wanted to vote on the plan. Spokane's mayor of only two weeks, who campaigned as an anti-incinerator candidate, has been thwarted by the council and now was contemplating quitting, the caller lamented.

"They're very angry and upset about having their democratic rights just trampled all over," says Collette, the organizing director of the Citizen Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (CCHW), headquartered in Arlington. "I said to them, 'How ironic that you can get more democracy in Bulgaria than you can in Spokane, Wash. Maybe you should build a Spokane Wall around city hall.'"

As popular democratic uprisings reshape the political landscape abroad, the state of the art of "citizen politics" here in the heartland of Western democracy is coming under closer scrutiny. Have Americans largely lost what the citizens in the streets of Bucharest and Prague have newly found? Has public interest taken a backseat to special interests? Does the uncast vote of apathy elect national leaders and determine national agenda?

Michael Pertschuk and David Cohen don't think so. They're convinced the public citizen in America is alive and kicking the can't-fight-city-hall habit. But if the war for democracy in this country was won long ago, it is public-interest activists rather than the public at large who continue to fight the battles. And Pertschuk and Cohen come as close as anyone to being the strategic command. Will Collette, himself a veteran activist of 21 years, respectfully refers to them as "the old graybeards" of the public-interest movement.

"It really is a phenomenon where citizens voluntarily come together outside of government and outside of formal political parties to mobilize in

support of things they believe in," says Pertschuk, 56, looking more professorial than combative behind a cluttered desk at the Advocacy Institute, the nonprofit organization he and Cohen established five years ago to counsel and encourage public-interest groups nationwide.

In the hallway outside his office, staffers and interns hustle about, showing no less resolve than the pick-wielding Germans battering down part of the Berlin Wall on the evening news the night before. Yet Pertschuk knows keeping perspective is important to championing public good. High on a wall at the institute's headquarters on Rhode Island Avenue NW is a memento of his contentious tenure as commissioner at the Federal Trade Commission during the Reagan administration: The huge wooden sign, salvaged by colleagues from the original Al's Magic Shop, reads, "Washington's Headquarters for Magic, Tricks, Jokes—Fireworks."

In fact, it is a bag of political tricks, and sometimes even fireworks, that the Advocacy Institute provides groups who don't know where else to turn when up against a community issue. Pertschuk warns against drawing the parallels too close, but he sees a kindred spirit between the people he counsels and the people demanding democracy in Eastern Europe.

"The citizen movements, the voluntary citizen organizations that we basically work with, are groups who are brought together because of a vision that extends beyond themselves—for the public good, or what they see as the public good," says Pertschuk. "... And this is exactly what is happening in Eastern Europe."

Yet, what is perceived as the public's enemy here is not so clearly defined as a repressive dictator or bankrupt communism. According to its annual report for fiscal 1989, the Advocacy Institute assisted on a full gamut of concerns, such as control of tobacco and alcohol use, peace in

Central America, reproductive freedom, energy conservation, paperwork reduction, arms control and economic justice. The dozens of organizations it counseled range from Congress Watch and Planned Parenthood to Smoke-Free Santa Fe and the Maine Peace Mission. The enemy? "... Ignorance, privilege, corruption and unaccountable power," says Pertschuk.

Unlike special-interest lobbyists (Pertschuk describes them as hired guns who are in it "to protect their own pocketbooks"), the Advocacy Institute tries to direct its attention to those whose pocketbooks are near empty. Funded by foundation and private contributions, it provides its services free of charge. "We defined our role and those we would serve as essentially those who don't have money; mostly our counseling is limited to groups that can't afford to hire a lobbyist," he says.

There are exceptions. The institute has lent its expertise to the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and the American Cancer Society, among other well-heeled groups. But, Pertschuk explains, in each of those cases, there was an opportunity to learn as much as to give. And refining the art of public-interest lobbying has been part of the institute's agenda from the start.

In 1984, with his term over at the FTC, Pertschuk turned to his old friend David Cohen, who after 20-some years in Washington, including a stint as president of Common Cause, was known as the "dean of public-interest lobbying." While Cohen had become Mr. Outside in fighting to bend the system to serve the public, Pertschuk had become Mr. Inside, conducting legislative warfare as an aide to several progressive senators. They had known each other since 1962, when Pertschuk found Cohen to be one of the few liberal lobbyists willing to listen to his arguments against smoking and the tobacco industry.

"I thought if we combined our experience, just by virtue of being around here for almost 50 years together, we could help groups who are beginning to develop another new campaign to learn all the things that we had to learn painfully," says Pertschuk, "to help them be a little bit more professional, a little bit more skillful about getting their issue on the agenda."

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To that end, besides its direct counseling, Pertschuk and Cohen have developed workshops on the skills of lobbying and teaching materials that guide individuals and groups through the fundamentals of public-interest campaigns. Education also was Pertschuk's main motivation in writing two books: the 1986 "Giant Killers" reads like a case-by-case manual for public-interest commandos; and "The People Rising," published last summer, fleshes out the campaign that blocked Robert Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court two years ago.

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So far, that has excluded only a former chairman of the John Birch Society in rural Georgia who wanted help in setting up a "rip-off" alternative to the American Cancer Society, and an English-only group whose aims would have conflicted with the Hispanic groups the institute already was counseling.

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side—but not all," says Pertschuk. "We've done some work with the National Taxpayers Union, which certainly goes back and forth wherever waste is occurring. And, in the health area, we work in tobacco and in alcohol, and those are ideologically blind issues."

The people also come out of the hinterlands. Two years ago, Pertschuk heard from the Pele Defense Fund, a group of Hawaiian natives fighting the development of geothermal energy systems on the islands that was decimating their sacred lands. "Although it did seem like quite an exotic group, it turns out that their issue is quite a serious one," he recalls. "Besides ignoring their religious rights... the process was breaking up the rain forests in Hawaii."

The institute consulted with the group. And while Pertschuk refuses to take credit for it, he says the Pele Defense group has become "extremely successful in gaining the attention of the media... and was very careful to join forces with the environmental groups and with the taxpayer groups. 'Looking for unlikely allies is something we counsel people on,' he says.

If there was a lesson to be learned for the campaign against the Bork nomination, that may be it. Pertschuk, who stayed primarily on the sidelines of that contest, calls the campaign "a passionate uprising" of people representing various ideologies who shared the same bedrock concern.

"Bork is a very distinguished judge, very much a part of the Washington establishment, very much liked by people on all sides of the political fence, and a real intellectual," says Pertschuk. "My sense as an old Washington hand was there was not a prayer that Bork would be defeated. It fooled all the wise guys in Washington. What we really didn't take into account was how deeply felt the Constitution is for people..."

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Subsequent attempts by Bork defenders, and by the judge himself in his own book and statements, to rewrite that episode as perpetrated by a "lynch mob" of radical leftists, dismiss-

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es the fact that it was an instance in which democracy for and by the people worked, says Pertschuk. "It wasn't just people in Washington sending out directives to make the troops dance. It was people who had taken the time to study and learn and become involved, and the more they did, the more excited they got about the fact that Bork wanted to change their Constitution. And that was pretty powerful."

Since co-founding the institute, Pertschuk has been pleasantly surprised by just how competent the ordinary citizen, once sufficiently aroused, can be in waging a public-interest campaign. "We try to give people some sense of confidence in their own competence," he says.

While visiting Santa Fe recently, Pertschuk checked in with the head of Smoke-Free Santa Fe, a group lobbying against smoking in public places. A press conference was scheduled for the next day at the Pink Adobe, a restaurant that would announce it was banning smoking. She figured Pertschuk's presence would draw more media.

During the press conference, he sat nearby as the Pink Adobe's assistant manager handled the press like an old pro. "If we had spent three months training him on what to say at that meeting, he couldn't have done better," says Pertschuk. "He is an alert and informed citizen" who anticipated every objection raised by the tobacco industry.

"Demystifying the process is a lot of what we do," says Pertschuk. "We tend to say that, by and large, groups with a serious cause are capable of representing themselves. And, although there are professional skills to be learned, nonprofessionals are capable of acquiring those skills. All they need is a little guidance and a little self-confidence and some of these local leaders can be enormously effective."

The stumbling block they run into, says Pertschuk, is seldom incompetence. "Some people are not happy trying to make the system move from A to B. They'd rather sit back and lament that the system will never move from A to Z. And they don't belong in this kind of work."

Thursday: McActivism or Commitment?

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