



Public Affairs: Your Online Newsletter

Special Conference edition • December • 2007

Public Affairs: Your Online Newsletter

Special Conference edition • December • 2007

Our 8th Annual Conference: The Art and Science of Public Affairs

Riding the Grassroots Wave was the theme. "It's all about behavioural change," said our opening speaker.

Annual General Meeting: PAAC meets GRIC and Joe MacDonald rises again

Former president Joe MacDonald is back, and a merger is in the wind. Read all about it.

Award of Distinction Winner Hugh Segal: The Red Chamber's outspoken Red Tory

He's the junior Conservative senator with the engaging personality and the outspoken style.

Riding the wave: Grass roots, grass tops and other growing things

It's dear to some people's hearts - activism in political clothes. Herewith a declaration of terms.

Amy Showalter, renowned PAC expert: American lessons for Canadian grass rooters

Cincinnati-based fireball Amy Showalter told us what she knows about grassroots work. Some of it, anyway.

Case studies: Making grassroots activism work for you

Two speakers, one from a teachers' union and one a consultant, talked about the nuts and bolts of grassroots.

More case studies: Identifying strategic opportunities

Guest speakers talked about specific examples of activism which succeeded, and some still in progress.

Building stakeholder buy-in: The importance of third-party support

Getting grassroots support is possible for big corporations or the little guy.

Herewith some jewels of advice.

Closing plenary session: The shape of activism to come

Future networking tools called Web 2.0 hold promise for grassroots activism, if they're exploited.

[Our 8th Annual Conference](#)

The Art and Science of Public Affairs

On November 21, 2007 leading experts in public affairs gathered in Toronto for the Public Affairs Association of Canada's annual Conference, *The Art and Science of Public Affairs*. The theme was *Riding the Grassroots Wave*, and featured American PAC (Political Action Committee) expert **Amy Showalter** to start things off. "It's all about behavioural change," she told her audience at the opening plenary session. "'Build from strengths - figure out what you're doing well and do it better."

The Conference was preceded by PAAC's Annual General Meeting. Both events took place at the Sutton Place Hotel in downtown Toronto; the AGM in the morning and then the all-day Conference. As has been the case every year, reporting and photography was handled by one writer/photographer, so we have reports and photos from selected sessions only. Therefore, as is always the case, to get the full benefit of our all-day Conference, you had to be there. Herewith our report.

[Annual General Meeting](#)

PAAC meets GRIC and Joe MacDonald rises again

This year at our Annual General Meeting, **Elaine Flis** stepped down as President after two eventful and highly productive years in the top slot. She remains as ex-officio. **Joe MacDonald**, well known as a steady hand on the tiller some years ago, returns as President. Director **Paul Burns** becomes Vice President, **Howard Brown** continues as Events Chair, and another old hand from past Boards, **Atul Sharma**, steps up once again as Secretary-Treasurer. **Jodi Shanoff** becomes a new face on the Board, and **Chris Churchill** re-upped as a Director. The terms of **Ross Lamont**, **Lawrence Sereacki** and **Kathleen Perchaluk** continue. Click over to our Presidents and Directors page to check the list and get their job details and contact co-ordinates.



Joe's back - Joe MacDonald returns as PAAC President, as Elaine Flis steps down after two eventful and productive years.

Stepping down as Secretary-Treasurer, **Mike Ras** was able to report good news in the dollar department. "Our events this year have turned a healthy profit," he said, even though they were never intended to be the big money maker the Conference is. To keep the dollars healthy, he announced a slight increase in dues for members, but not for students.

Elaine took the podium at the AGM to recap some of the events of the last year of her watch. Two key developments were the switch to The Innovolve Group as our management company, and more event co-hosting and co-sponsorships with the Government Relations Institute of Canada (GRIC). The GRIC connection stems in part from our need to increase our presence in Ottawa. "It has become clear to PAAC and GRIC that our associations complement one another," she reported. The two organizations are now discussing the possibility of a merger, with Elaine, **Chris Benedetti**, **Mike Ras** and **Pierre Leduc** negotiating for PAAC. If and when a merger happens, it will result in a larger organization invigorated with wider representation, which will be better able to represent its causes and issues on the national stage. "None of this is written in stone," Flis added. "Nothing will be ratified without general membership approval."

[Award of Distinction winner Hugh Segal](#)

The Red Chamber's outspoken Red Tory

Accepting the 2007 PAAC Award of Distinction at our annual Conference luncheon was

Hugh Segal, junior Senator from the Conservative Party of Canada, bestselling author, accomplished political strategist, and master of public policy from both sides of the fence that separates public affairs and government.



Senator Hugh Segal (left) chats with Gilbert Heffern (right) as former PAAC President Graham Murray strolls past (background).

If the Award criteria includes superior skills managing complex issues, unflagging professionalism and personal integrity, persuasive communication and innovation in public affairs - and these things most definitely *are* the criteria - then Hugh Segal is a natural. He was appointed to the Senate in 2005 as a Conservative by Prime Minister Paul Martin, a Liberal, either because Segal was an ideal choice or because Martin felt his neck on the patronage issue, or perhaps for both reasons.

Senator Segal has thus far made his impression by serving as chair of the Foreign Affairs and International Trade Committee, by serving on Agriculture and Aboriginal Affairs committees, and then by being thrown off the Foreign Affairs committee last February amid accusations it was because he was too outspoken. At the time he managed to combine outspokenness with grace in a crisis, and it wasn't the first time in his career he managed that.

He has been Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, has been an adviser to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and his Award of Distinction is the latest in a list of honours including the Order of Canada, an Honorary Doctorate of Law from the Royal Military College, and an appointment as an Honorary Captain in the navy. He has written four books on Canadian politics and government, and you never know when he'll come out with another one. In matters of public affairs he has, as some folks say, been there, done that and got the T-shirt.

At the luncheon he spoke entertainingly and generally about his background. "It's great to be here," he said, and considered. "Actually, when you're a Conservative senator, it's

great to be *anywhere*." Segal was also at pains to remind us that although he's a senator, he's still youngish. "For me, to be in a room where 'depends' is a verb is a wonderful thing."

The title of his talk was *Beyond Accountability: Public Affairs and Public Results*, and he got to that eventually, once his self-effacing humour and sly digs at the senatorial establishment gained him command of the room. "I believe advocacy is part of the democratic system," he said, cutting over to serious thinking. "Democratic politics is, in the end, always about advocacy." All factions, groups, activists and companies, he reminded us, need to engage in advocacy in order to sculpt good public policy, and any politico who forgets that is unclear on the democratic concept. "In a democracy, what you see in the papers is really a battle over the agenda." Meaning: who will get on it, how much prominence they will have, and therefore how their ideas will affect public policy. "That is the core difference between democracy and other ways of running the store."

Segal clearly 'gets it' about the democracy of which we are all a part. In countries with other systems - socialist tyrannies, communities tyrannies, monarchist tyrannies and religious tyrannies to mention a few examples which Segal did not specifically name - there is no such cacophony; just a single depressing note of conformity. In our partisan and boisterous system, he said, "we may despair at the cacophony of debate, but the absence of that debate results in a coherent agenda that is usually wrong."

His own advocacy experience spans a varied career encompassing public policy advocacy and runs at elected office that didn't quite work out. Recurring themes include stopping waste and inefficiency, advocating against poverty and favouring accountability. He advocated televising the Senate. A colleague waved his hand at the Red Chamber before them: "You want to televise *this*?" People have the right to see what happens there, Segal insisted. He also advocates accountability in matters of spending public money. "We should not have to wait to see how government is spending our money until there isn't a goddam thing we can do about it."

Such outspokenness regularly gets him into hot water. He doesn't mind. Kind of likes it, in fact, if his smile as he talks about it is any indicator. He put forward a motion to hold a public referendum on abolition of the Senate. Why would he, a senator, do that? Not because he wants to see it fall but because he believes the public should have a say in matters of the Constitution - matters that Canadians alive today have not had the opportunity to determine. Elsewhere, people fight over the right to democracy - Iraqis and Afghans are dying to vote in matters of their new fledgling constitutions, he pointed out. If it's good for them to have a direct say about their Constitutions, why should Canadians not have a say?

This is interesting talk coming from a Canadian Senator, and a Conservative at that. After all, referenda carry an element of risk, and events like the historic Charlottetown vote and Ontario's recent vote on electoral reform, come typically from Liberals. Segal is unrepentant. "I'm proud to be a Red Tory," he said. That's how he comes to advocate a minimum guaranteed income, and although he has had no success with that initiative, he hasn't abandoned his advocacy for a minimum income or against waste. There's nothing

red about Segal's stance on that last issue: "Confronting issues of waste is the best way to free up money for tax cuts and national defense," he said.

Senator or not, Hugh Segal is still a public affairs practitioner; still an advocate working for a client. "My new client is the people of Canada." And as for his fellow Senators, despite his willingness to put their fate in the hands of his newest clients, he's ready to advocate for their cause too, in the hope that Canadians will benefit from a more informed opinion of them. The Senate of Canada not just a room full of ancient men cobwebbed into their thickly padded chairs, bored, dozing or dead, he insisted. "Many of us are still under 70, still take solid food, still do daily exercise," Senator Segal said. "And we are trying to do a good job."



A distinct honour - (L-R) PAAC Past President Elaine Flis, Award of Distinction winner Senator Hugh Segal, Elisa Schupp, Vice President Central Canada, CNW Group (sponsors of the Luncheon) and outgoing PAAC Secretary-Treasurer Mike Ras.

[Riding the wave](#)

Grass roots, grass tops and other growing things

The theme of the Conference, *Riding the Grassroots Wave*, was all about citizen engagement and what grows where public affairs meets activism. Our new-again President, Joe MacDonald, introduced it as "a subject near and dear to my heart," and he might as easily have said his *activist's* heart. At an afternoon session, he and former PAAC President Chris Benedetti got down to some important basic concepts and

definitions.



Getting set - Bruce Cox, Executive Director of Greenpeace Canada (left), who was also a presenter at a Conference session, checks in with his friend Joe MacDonald, just as Joe and co-presenter Chris Benedetti (background) got set to make their afternoon presentation.

Grassroots politics, explained MacDonald, can be defined as "Deployment of constituency-based political power to influence how legislators vote on an issue important to your organization." And when you engage in it, he added, "you are best not to forget the stakeholders - the ones you know, and the ones you don't." Meaning: Don't let a stakeholder you didn't know about jump out of the bushes and yell 'boo.' With that in mind, grassroots activism can be hugely effective. If it's done poorly or misleadingly, it can turn around and bite you. And the technique is available to corporations and big politics, not just protestors.

Beware grass tops, ad hoc or 'Astroturf' campaigns, Joe said. Grass tops is when the speakers are those presumed to be influential but don't really speak on behalf of the basic voter. Ad hoc campaigns are grassroots in a hurry. Most insidious of all is the so-called Astroturf campaign, which as the name implies, is phony - things like letter or email campaigns or web-based 'movements' that are nothing more than a vested interest, usually a corporate one, masquerading as a grassroots campaign the way Astroturf pretends to be grass. Such campaigns can do damage to those who launch them, because they're not convincing, and are easily outed.

A few things to keep in mind: Top-down commitment to the campaign issue is essential for success. "The body doesn't work well without a head," said MacDonald. Yet a true, effective grassroots campaign is an elemental force in politics. "If people are talking about your issue at the kitchen table, they'll be talking about it at the Cabinet table," he said. "It is very difficult for a politician to stand in the way of kitchen table politics."

Not only must your grassroots campaign be the real thing - as opposed to Astroturfing or ad hoc flailing about - but it must be based on a well tested message. "It has been my

experience that too often the brain trust knows the message, runs out with it, then cannot understand why nobody is listening," MacDonald said. The reason? "They didn't test it." To avoid seeing your message fall flat, he strongly recommends the use of focus groups to test the message before 'going live' with it - at which point you can check its pulse with standard methods such as polling.

Chris Benedetti went further, arguing that it's vital to develop a rigorous assessment tool designed to be based on field work that's simple enough to be reliable. Be sure to link your assessment back to your original objectives. Remember, the spin on your message is for the listener; your evaluation of your own results must be more hard-nosed. "We have to guard against believing our own spin too much," Benedetti said. One method many in government relations overlook, he added, is to simply ask for feedback from the government people with whom you wish to relate. "It's OK to periodically go to government and say, how are we doing? What do you think of us?"

When outcomes don't meet expectations, said Benedetti, you're stuck with a loss of credibility. The reasons often come back to a failure to keep one's collective eye on the basics. "What are we doing? How are we doing it? Does it relate back to what matters to us? What results are we seeing? It's mind-boggling how often these questions are not asked."

[Amy Showalter](#)

American lessons for Canadian grass rooters

To get the ball rolling at the morning plenary session, we welcomed **Amy Showalter**, a Cincinnati-based PAC (Political Action Committee) expert and human fireball who specializes in helping associations and corporations raise their level of grassroots and therefore PAC effectiveness. Her presentation was titled: *Why Winners Win: Secrets of High-Performance Grassroots Organizations that are Safe for Everyday Use*. With her rapid-fire delivery and stage-pacing energy, she was just the ticket to getthingsmovingveryfastinthemorning - you can read about her on her company web site, www.showaltergroup.com - although Canadian grass-rooters might want to tone down their implementation of her advice, Canadian appetites being generally more staid than those of our American brethren.

Still, her specialty is to fire up grassroots evangelists and staff for her clients who wish to advance a cause politically in the U.S., and her lessons carry over the border. It's not the same as lobbying, she said. Not exactly. She started out as a lobbyist, but early on, "I recognized my limitations as a lobbyist," she said. Indeed, Showalter admitted to being a "lousy lobbyist," but her presentation made it clear that her epiphany was not her own limitations but those of lobbying itself. Not only did she find she preferred to help grassroots activists, but she soon realized that state legislators listen *more* to the grassroots than they do to lobbyists - a revelation which is surely valid in Canada and

everywhere else where democracy exists as more than an autocrat's sham.



Featured speaker - Amy Showalter takes the stage (left) then relaxes (right) after getting everyone revved up for the day.

Legislators view the ordinary person as more credible than those who are 'group leaders' in name only, she said - a comment that evoked thoughts of John Tory's recent troubles on the religious schools issue in Ontario's 2007 election. Community leaders, according to some reports, told Tory their constituencies would embrace a politician who favoured funding their special schools. The grassroots reaction proved different. So yes, what she said resonated with our experience.

"Abundance dilutes impact," she added. "It used to be that if you had your grassroots posse you had an advantage. Now everybody is doing it." The same is true of technology. It's not a panacea, she said. You cannot rule an issue with databases, email networks and the ability to make Internet technology sing and dance for you. "People used to talk about this as if they had just invented cold fusion," she said, but now that everyone and his 12-year old can do it, you can't take that attitude. The basics count more, and that still means cementing relationships.

Focus your efforts, she advised. Look carefully at case studies of similar activist politicking - not only studies of those that succeeded, which will show you what might work for you, but also those that did not, to warn you of pitfalls. For example: When dealing with legislators, it's important to understand their political situation. "The bigger their margin of victory, the better the chance they'll change their mind in your favour. Someone who skated into office on a one per cent margin has to be more concerned about who he'll tick off."

Showalter's advice is to identify people with real ability to connect with legislators. Find them, stroke them, and keep them onside. Say thanks to your people; recognize and applaud those who volunteer. Let volunteers help determine what you're going to do. "Delegate important work to your people, she advised. "It helps keep them engaged." Be

sure your views are in line with those of your volunteers, and vice versa. Your team's truly held beliefs are what drive a cause, because they drive attitudes, and attitudes create the culture than defines commitment. "When it all works, there is great energy."

A recurring theme in her talk and in some of the later Conference sessions was that, despite fighting your cause through a grassroots activist network you must not confuse activity with results. Lots of press releases, newsletters and media mentions reflect activity. Results? Those are all about behavioral changes. "It's not what's easy; it's what works that matters," she warned "If I influence somebody, then they take over the issue. They own it." And can motivate others. _

[Case studies](#)

Making grassroots activism work for you

In the morning session, *Making Grassroots Advocacy Work for You*, **Victoria Hunt** and **Brett Bell** did just exactly what Showalter suggested earlier: They looked at case studies which succeeded and others which did not. Hunt, representing the Ontario English Catholic Teacher's Association (OECTA), was there to talk about her work with OECTA's GR department, which spearheads the teacher's organization's political activity. Bell is a Project Manager for a consulting group that specializes in masterminding land-use and zoning issue campaigns across North America.



Brett Bell (left) with session moderator Elaine Flis (middle) and co-presenter Victoria Hunt of Ontario's Catholic teacher's union.

Hunt spoke first. The political activism of the Catholic teacher's union, which helped the Liberals win Ontario in 2003, was right up their alley, she explained. "We go back to the 60s, with a history of social justice activism," she said. "Our members were really good at fighting against something. We have a long history of that." Indeed: apartheid, the right of

teachers to strike and other issues she sees as fundamental social justice have all been near and dear to teachers' hearts. "We had many student days lost to strikes back then," she recalled. "We were always tougher in negotiations." So they felt at home in 2003, helping fight against the Son Of Mike Harris. "Our members did not work to get Liberals elected in 2003," she said. "We worked to get Tories defeated."

But that was then. The 2007 campaign was now. Harris was gone, nibbled to death by protesting ducks of which OECTA was only one; apartheid is no longer available as a rallying cause, and the 2007 fight was not against the evils of anything; it was to boost the party teachers deemed best. "To work to get a government re-elected was a foreign concept," she said. "We had to change the channel to positive politics." To do that OECTA still drew on its kick-em-when-they're-up experience from the anti-Harris pogroms of the late 1990s. "Our members said to us, 'don't tell us how to vote,' but we had to remind them of the Dark Ages, from 1995 to 2003."

Hard to be neutral

To that end the union paid a professional advertising company to create a booklet for their members, titled *Get Ready*. There was also a newsletter, campaign-style buttons, refrigerator magnets and a web site. They created a video production on DVD, which Hunt played for her PAAC audience at her presentation. "The hardest thing about making this was being neutral," she said. "Many of those in our central office didn't want to be." And in fact, the booklet *Get Ready* informs teachers, "Immediately following their victory, the Harris government began remodeling Ontario's educational system. Their agenda was simple: to create a crisis of faith in education so that the public would be receptive to massive reorganization and privatization of publicly funded education." The booklet continues, "The government cut over \$2 billion from education funding, centralized education at Queen's Park and demoralized everyone connected to education." Hunt's video mirrored those analyses. On reflection, Hunt said, "I don't suppose it was perfectly neutral."

Clearly, neutrality is a tall order for people who dedicate their work to political goals, as school teachers do in Ontario. The teacher's union drew up a list of endorsed candidates, who would receive the public blessing of the union, and targeted candidates, who needed more help than that and thus would be assigned teachers to work for their campaign. (They were successful: Of 30 targeted ridings, 23 were Liberal victories. She was proud glad to report that the success of the Catholic teachers' political priorities can continue, because their primary goal is, in her words, "To create a political engine that keeps working all the time."

To talk about a political engine that kicks in when you hire the driver, Brett Bell was up next. He had some things to say about why some grassroots campaigns fail. As a Project Manager for The Saint Consulting Group, which serves client companies in Canada, the U.K. and the U.S., he knows all about "site fights" - land use and zoning issues that are invariably bogged down in NIMBYism. The goal for The Saint is to accomplish something activists would consider unsaintly: to design and execute grassroots political campaigns that ensure his clients' real estate projects are approved, their markets protected and the

NIMBYists are either defeated or never mobilize successfully. And he wasn't there to discuss his failures, either. The Saint mostly wins. "I'm talking about other people's failures," he said.

The key, of course, is to know the turf. People seldom form a NIMBY blockade against homes, schools or hospitals, but can be reliably expected to do so against casinos, industrial projects and Wal Mart. Even when you're working for what journalists call the Bad Guy, the key is to remember, "there is no substitute for real people," Bell said. "Without engaged citizens, your efforts will likely fail."

Once upon a site fight

You cannot substitute slick campaigns for real folks, he said, which is why 'grass tops' campaigns have fatal weaknesses. Grass tops - that, as Joe MacDonald would later outline, is when your issue features a front-man who puts on the appearance of grass roots but the roots really do not go very deep. So: Once upon a time, there was a site fight to be championed by a city council member on behalf of a certain group. Did the champion really speak for the constituents? Not really; he was a municipal politician and wanted to stay that way. "The weakness of a grass tops campaign is that these people cannot take the gloves off," said Bell. Meaning, this was not a real grassroots guy, and therefore was not a reliable ally. "The guy took a whiff of the political wind and decided the thing was about to be approved. So he changed sides."

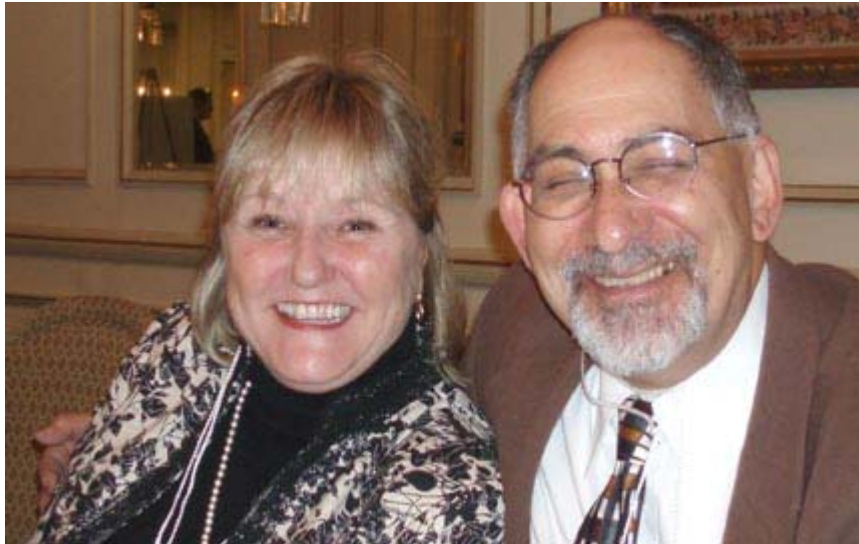
Another weakness of some phony grassroots campaigns - the ones commonly derided as Astroturfing - is that they can be readily exposed. If a letter writing or email-generating campaign only pretends to be from local citizens but in fact is orchestrated by a vested interest, you can bet someone will find out - usually a reporter who does that sort of thing for a living, and is therefore very good at it. Then the whole effort is publicly discredited. So, if a phony email campaign against a new company turns out to be coming from its competition, the whole thing blows up in their face like an exploding cigar. "People don't like to hear businesses complain about competition," Bell said. "Which is why it's better to have a community group do it for you."

In site fights, the winner is the one who effectively appeals to real public groups. "Elected officials are adept at sniffing out which group has real numbers," he said. To appeal to such groups, you need facts, not just emotion. "The 'I'm Mad As Hell' approach will only get you in the door," he said. "I believe in motivating people by appealing to their naked self interest. We like to say, 'this will affect your quality of life.'" In his case, that might mean convincing people that the new real estate development or corporate project will provide something good for them and their community, so that any opposing NIMBYism dies for lack of sustenance. His message: Grassroots campaigns do not belong exclusively to the left, the loud and the Luddites. If my grassroots are healthier than your grassroots, I win.

[More case studies](#)

Grassroots in action: Identifying strategic opportunities

In the morning session, *Grassroots in Action: Identifying Strategic Opportunities*, our guest speakers discussed grassroots issues from the standpoint of strategic opportunities rather than the actual dos and don'ts of fighting the fight. The speakers were **Louise Harris**, Director of Advocacy, Government Relations and Communications for the Ontario Bar Association - don't you dare call it the lawyer's union - and **William Gleberzon**, of CARP, which stands for Canada's Association for the 50 Plus. (Actually, the last two letters are holdovers from when it was Canadian Association for Retired Persons, so the acronym makes sense. Why a group that specializes in protests over issues affecting older people would want to use the acronym CARP is a separate issue.) Gleberzon called CARP an association of mature Canadians who don't take money from government and so ensure that their positions remain untainted.



Comrades in grassroots - Louise Harris of the OBA, left, with William Gleberzon of the Canadian 50-Plus Association.

For CARP, a strategic opportunity came a decade ago, when Paul Martin, as Minister of Finance, introduced changes in the Old Age Security rules that underscored how Orwellian its name is. A particular senior's benefit, previously paid to elderly *individuals*, would now be paid to elderly *couples*. The change was clearly based on the notion that old folks are weak, and did not anticipate the power of the grassroots campaign that would result. "It took us two years," Gleberzon recalled, but Martin pulled back and then did the 'I'm man enough to admit it' thing, crediting CARP with changing his mind. It was a classic case a pol making lemonade, and Gleberzon's helped by not gloating: "It takes political courage for a politician to stand up and say, 'I made a mistake.'" He didn't elaborate on what it takes to make a mistake of such proportions. Instead, he pointed out that the fight not only resulted in a win - the government deciding to save money in other

ways rather than be further portrayed as muggers in Zegna suits - but also caused CARP's membership to go nowhere but up.

The light of a flickering candle

Not all of CARP's issues have gone so well. He described another issue involving the nest eggs of elderly people. This issue involved Locked In Funds, or LIFs, the details of which will only bog down this article to no good purpose. The main point is that LIFs are an investment which Ontario pols are happy to unlock for themselves and not for others. CARP objects, but the issue is so esoteric that even journalists interested in pillorying the government have not shown much enthusiasm for the story, which is what makes it a loser as a grassroots rallying point. CARP's campaign was eclipsed in the last election, the Liberals won, and Gleberzon admitted, "Now it's back to the drawing board." The moral of the story: Your grassroots issue must be readily explainable - like Paul Martin's lunatic commando strike against elderly couples - in order to generate a groundswell. People can relate to the plight of elderly poor couples made to share a single portion of government gruel by the light of a flickering candle. They can't get up a head of steam for retired people's investment beefs.

Whether on the winning side or not, CARP represents a group often seen as oppressed, and this can only help in a grassroots campaign. Louise Harris spoke for a profession often seen as the opposite, which is why lawyers are the subjects of criticism, put-downs and jokes, by people who don't happen to need a lawyer at that moment. Although the lawyerly status of her members makes it difficult for them to get on the sympathetic side of the public, the flip side is that when you've got 17,000 lawyer on the team you're not likely to run short of money or influence.

Public support for lawyer's issues is not a lost cause if you come at it from the right direction, Harris explained. Public opinion polling continuously tells us that, in Harris's words, "We have a legal system but we don't have a justice system." Working with that fact is another example of the fine art of making lemonade. True, the news media routinely report that in courts ruled by unelected judges who used to be lawyers, the best lawyer wins and if justice happens it's an accident. But only a public affairs defeatist would see this as an impediment. Canadians want to be reasonable people, which is why the OBA mounted a campaign to raise grassroots support for the idea that more resources for the legal system will cure its ills. Public outrage at specific legal verdicts, easy bail and repeat offenders is being redirected into a campaign for more resources. "We build that message into everything we do," said Harris. "My job is to ride the crest of that wave."

First let them vent

The Ontario Bar Association saw a strategic opportunity to go to the public with the right message for a grassroots appeal. "My concept for OBA was to partner with MPPs in a series of Town Hall meetings," Harris said. In each, an MPP would preside over the meeting with an OBA rep, and invite 'stakeholders' to talk about legal system issues. Everything was framed around the need for more resources. "We would let people vent,

but then a member or co-chair would say you need to come back to these questions." They capped the program with a Justice Stakeholder Summit at which, said Harris, "we had 165 people who represented millions of Ontarians." Their report, scheduled for release this December, was to contain recommendations for Attorneys General at provincial and federal levels. What it says, however, is less illustrative than the process. "The partnering of our profession and the public was a unique concept," Harris said. And it's proof that grassroots campaign techniques are not limited to those usually deemed victims.

[Building stakeholder buy-in](#)

The importance of third-party support

The idea that the mighty can also use grassroots activism was carried on in an afternoon session, *Building for Tomorrow: Third Party Support and Stakeholder Relationships*. The session featured **Tom Ormsby**, Manager of Public and Corporate Affairs for the DeBeers Canada Victor Project, a billion-dollar's worth of diamond mine sitting smack in the middle of aboriginal land in Northern Ontario. Talk about a public affairs challenge: With some of the finest diamonds anyone in the industry ever saw waiting to be dug up and turned into money, the worldwide carbon-crystal cartel can hardly afford a Goliath-slaying grassroots campaign against them. Ormsby told us some of the ways in which they raise grassroots sentiments in favour of the project.



Presenters William Ormsby of DeBeers (left), session moderator Roberta Bustard of the Ontario Ministry of Northern Development and Mines (middle) and Bonnie Green, of the United Church.

The shorthand for this is stakeholder engagement - it's all about understanding your stakeholders and their goals. The stakeholder to stroke the most is the aboriginal community, and the DeBeers stated ethic, 'Friends First, Business Second,' is by

coincidence also an ethic of the aboriginal culture. Or maybe not by coincidence. DeBeers, explained Ormsby, makes a point of planning its mine operations over an anticipated 12-year production life with a finite end in sight, complete with environmental sensitivities recognized at the outset, an environmental cleanup promised at the end, and plenty of benefits for the local culture in the middle. "It's all part of building trust," he said. To that end, DeBeers also vows to continue its planning well beyond the end of the mine, to ensure continued benefits to the locals and thus a reason for them to favour the project rather than oppose it - a theme of cultivating local self-interest that echoes that of earlier presenters like Brett Bell.

Re-re-re-re-spect

In a Canadian aboriginal community, key issues relate to respect for aboriginal land, respect for the environment and respect for the people who have always lived there. "You cannot afford to be selfish," Ormsby said. "It's not all about you." DeBeers built its social and environmental approach from the ground up, rather than add these things on the fly as an afterthought. "The beginning - that's where you start your stakeholder development," said Ormsby. "The Impact/Benefit agreements we signed with the First Nations are not required in Ontario, but we would not go ahead without them."

Another useful skill is to 'place interventions,' he said. Meaning: When you dig into the earth for something like diamonds, you're bound to also come up with people who object, and who try to raise a grassroots movement against you. "They try to infiltrate the community and tell them we're trying to destroy mankind as we know it." The solution is to cultivate community support at the start, particularly in matters likely to become contentious. "Avoid putting forward ideas that might raise red flags to those who don't like you," Ormsby said. "Better to get others to do it for you," he added - again, the same thing consultant Bell said earlier.

If corporate concerns who are used to being called Bad Guys can find a way to use grassroots politics, is it easier for those who are used to being Good Guys? Not always. In both case it takes hard work. **Bonnie Green** has worked in many capacities for the United Church in Brampton, and is now working to develop the church's relationships with the local community there. She is also a partner in consulting firms working to help churches adapt to change in their community relations.

A fire in Brampton's belly

As a longtime activist for human rights groups, peace activist groups, anti-apartheid groups and various social movements well-labeled in the media with the words peace and justice, her work in Brampton to put together a support group and care site for cancer patients nevertheless required hard work. The care site, dubbed Wellspring, in particular required help from land developers. "We had to create an alliance with developers, a group who had previously been the enemy," she said. (Shades of Victoria Hunt's words about teachers fighting for politicians.) "We had to find land developers with a fire in the belly."

Fire for what? For precisely what Ormsby had told us was happening at the DeBeers mine in Ontario's Third World. Green described for her audience a campaign that dug up land developer support for Wellspring the way DeBeers dug for aboriginal support to go with the diamonds, and the way Bell does it for clients. Thus, the session with Ormsby and Green supported the view that progressive corporate enterprises can work with communities, while communities can work with corporate concerns, with both applying the fundamentals of grassroots advocacy - yet in a co-operative spirit. When dealing with the Church, land developers were glad to do something likely to make the clouds part and let a beam of sunlight shine down upon them. Naked self-interest can be good.

The combined message of Ormsby and Green was that grassroots activism has its best outcome when it applies the essence of what we think of as civilized behaviour - the spirit of co-operation rather than confrontation. It works when both sides see a mutual benefit and work toward it.

[Closing plenary session](#)

The shape of activism to come

The closing plenary session, *Grassroots Advocacy 2.0*, took the issue of future activism out into the open. On the panel was **David Jones**, VP of Digital Communications at Hill & Knowlton Canada. He develops and executes PR campaigns using high tech tools such as blogs, podcasts and social networking tools. With him was **Cindy Clegg**, President of Cindy Clegg Communications/Synthetron. Her expertise is with communications and media relations for a variety of business and political interests. The session also featured **Derek Blackadder**, National Representative for the Canadian Union of Public Employees, who was there to tell about how unions are coming along in their use of the new high-tech tools in pursuit of their particular goals.



Activism to come - David Jones (left), Cindy Clegg (middle) and Derek Blackadder of CUPE (window seat) addressed our closing plenary session,

high atop the Sutton Place Hotel.

Clegg defined the expression, Web 2.0 as the newer uses of Internet technology, especially the relatively recent advent of social networking tools like Facebook. "Don't get overwhelmed by what's out there," she warned, but she assured her audience that these tools can be particularly useful in grassroots campaigns. "If people don't see themselves and their interests represented, it creates distrust of government," she said. That's bad for governments but it can be useful for grassroots movements that wish to appeal to that feeling. Yet governments can use this too, if they're not afraid of things like email campaigns that can allow people to contact their political reps, and therefore feel less distrustful. It can also gather the sort of input people provide if they feel protected, and free to speak their minds. "You can avoid groupthink if you give them anonymity."

The first incarnation of the Internet which rose up in the 90s - now dubbed Web 1.0 - was all about expanding standard information exchange to the faster methods of web postings and email. Now things are going further. "It's a very different world now," said David Jones. "With Web 2.0 we have a democratization of that information." Meaning: Anyone can say what they think and feel protected by anonymity if that's what they want. Whether that's freedom or anarchy depends on your point of view. Either way it's a powerful tool for grassroots campaigns by those who aren't shy of all those real live people saying what they think and perhaps being ready to act upon it. "The ability to mobilize - that's what's going on now," he said. "More and more people are living their lives online now," he said. "The barriers to entry are low."

So if it's all about the ability to mobilize, why was Derek Blackadder so glum about what the labour movement is doing with the new tools? "Our current use of the Net as an organizing tool is nothing less than dismal," he told his audience. Glum, perhaps, but clearly accurate - check most union sites and see for yourself. With few exceptions, the sites are stale, reflecting a style of top-down information movement which is the opposite of what social networks are all about, and which reflects a top-down style deeply ingrained into labour unions, Blackadder admitted. "They are unchanged since they were initiated 50 to 100 years ago." That style, he said, depends on strict controls on the distribution of information to be used for advancing causes and organizing not only workers but supporters for other aspects of the union cause.

There are few bright spots, according to Blackadder. He cited examples of labour organizations facilitating email campaigns to bedevil companies with which they take issue. "We've been sued by employers, which is an indication that we're doing rather well." One such campaign he described involved setting up a site that encouraged users to help send an email protest tsunami to a target company. Some see this as a morale boosting technique, in support of strikers on picket lines. So, he said, "There are some rays of hope" in labour's use of modern methods. But as far as social networking tools are concerned, the news is not so upbeat. "The labour movement's experience with Facebook has been terrible." Sure, a tool like Facebook can be used as an aid to organizing. But Facebook has a habit of shutting out users when an employer complains about uses that can be deemed abuses. Therefore, said Blackadder, "It has to be done

in-house. It has to be secure, safe."

The fundamental problem, readable between the lines of what Blackadder had to say, is that labour organizations are in a confrontational relationship with employers, while themselves maintaining the top-down organization style. They therefore depend on preserving this age-old confrontation and communicating it from the top-down to their members. Bottom-up percolation of information from the members in a cyber/virtual free-fire zone can disrupt the message needed to protect the relationship. In such an environment, the likelihood of uncontrollable social networking tools like Facebook benefiting the labour movement is, for the time being, slim.

Have your say

We welcome member input, whether it's a letter to the editor, a story suggestion or a proposal for a guest column. Feel free to email your input or suggestions to us. All submissions for publication on this site are subject to approval by the Editorial Board.

Editorial Board: Joe MacDonald, Elaine Flis, Chris Churchill, Guy Skipworth
Paul Burns

Writer/Editor: David Silburt

Public Affairs is E-published by the Public Affairs Association of Canada
18 Eastern Avenue
Toronto, ON M5A 1H5

Tel: 416-364-0050 x306 • Fax: 416-364-0606