



a report from

2nd congressional district of arizona

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The Sledgehammer Lobby

*"The danger in the growth and influence
and pressure exerted by single-issue
groups is that too many lawmakers may
find it easier to do nothing at all.
Clearly, we are headed down a very
dangerous path."*

Probably very few of us would judge our friends, our relatives, our children or even our institutions by a single act. It's unthinkable to imagine a parent condemning a child because of an isolated incident that really has little to do with the child's overall development.

And I'm just as certain that none of us, finding a bad apple in a bin at our favorite market, would rush to condemn the entire grocery store chain.

But as of late, we have seen the application of a different and non-traditional standard applied to men and women in public life. It exists in the emergence of single-issue politics, and it is a concept that already has had far more effect than many of us probably suspect. Unless the challenge is recognized -- and reformed -- it may hold the very real possibility of preempting a good share of our political participation.

Many single-issue groups share a common denominator: they go after their objective with a sledgehammer; compromise is an alien concept and the broad voting record is often of no consideration whatever -- only the position on a single issue, the issue with which one group may tie its whole purpose for being.

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On every working day, more and more of the mail that pours into my offices in Tucson and Washington comes from these organizations. A lot of it is mail orchestrated by each organization's headquarters, many of which are located right here in the nation's capital.

The causes and issues run the gamut. Some tend to be reasoned and thoughtful approaches to an issue or cause, but too many tend to come off as shrill, strident and even threatening and abusive messages that could have no influence on any reasonable legislator.

Government has always been influenced by great numbers of organizations. Special interest groups have always lobbied before legislative bodies, and many are respected as the providers of good and useful information that is helpful in writing new laws.

But it has always been traditional, as well, that the majority of these organizations were interested in a *broad* range of issues and problems, each related to their particular concern. Many were thoughtfully aware of what was not only desirable, but what was practical and reasonable for the country as a whole. Few of these organizations rose and fell on a single issue.

But gradually that has changed. I'm not certain I know exactly why, but I do have a few thoughts about it, and I want to share them with you.

First, it seems to me that as voter participation in this country has declined, we have been left with a vacuum -- a vacuum of influence. If the voters do not exert themselves, who then? It doesn't take long to see that the single-issue organizations are busy filling the gap.

With the decline in voter interest -- and the percentages of Americans voting in past elections show that decline to be discouraging indeed -- we are hearing of something called "the Me generation."

Sociologists insist that Americans in the 70s became self-centered, more prone to individual interests and pursuits, captivated by material possessions. I don't know if that's true or not -- but it does provide some basis for discussion.

I cannot help but wonder if our slip into cynicism has saddled some of us with the "blinders of pessimism" that have led to a selfish point of view, one that

says, the more frustrated, angry and cynical we become, the more narrow our interests, our point of view, our definition of what's best. This, in turn, can contribute to a far more serious problem and one that I wrote about last year -- our apparent "national paralysis."

There is a broad range of problems affecting our country today -- a collection of decisions awaits this generation as no generation before it. We are straddling the end of one era and the beginning of another. We must come to grips with energy, the economy and the vision of our national future for decades to come.

What we see coming out of single-issue politics is an array of fractured interests, each out for its own gain and advancement, with none attempting to address how their particular point of view might affect the larger national interest. What we don't see are the kind of answers we need.

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I'm not suggesting that lawmakers should not have their feet held to the fire now and then -- on the contrary, I accept and encourage that.

What bothers me is that we now seem embarked on a mission that is beginning to remind me of the old story about the camel that was designed by a committee -- the final product could neither walk nor stand. I just don't think that the single-issue influence represents a healthy turn of events for government in general. And it isn't just the Congress that gets the single-issue heat -- it's City Councils, Boards of Supervisors, State Legislatures -- everyone up and down the line is besieged by these mini-campaigns that almost universally ignore the big picture in favor of the narrow view.

What is best for a part of the country, or for one group of its citizens, is not always what's best for the whole country or all of its citizens -- and the broad concern is what a national lawmaker must weigh in almost every vote he or she casts on the floor of Congress.

* * *

I co-sponsored a bill last year to restore, in a small way, some of the balance that Americans deserve in their political process. This piece of legislation dealt with Political Action Committees, the legally constituted political arms of hundreds and hundreds of special interest groups in business, organized labor and many, many others.

This legislation sought to limit these Political Action Committees -- or PACs, as they are known -- to a donation of \$5,000 in each election year. Today, they are limited to \$5,000 per campaign, or \$15,000 for each election year. Congressional candidates would also be limited to a total of \$50,000 in donations from all PACs for any single election.

(That bill passed the House, in modified form. The dollar figures were changed, to \$6,000 per single contribution and to a \$70,000 maximum which candidates could receive in any election year from all PACs. The bill is now before the Senate.)

The amount of special interest PAC money in congressional elections in 1978 was 70 percent more than in 1976 and 200 percent more than in 1974.

These groups have a right and a responsibility to participate in the political process. But the fundamental issue here is balance -- balance versus *dominance* -- who will be participating in our political process and who will be *dominating* it? Unfortunately, the difference will become bigger still, unless we act now.

Isn't it better for our public people to depend truly on the *public* than on the special interests? Any special interest?

Winston Churchill once said that democracy wasn't perfect, it was just better than anything else. I agree. In our 200 years of existence Americans have seen the need from time to time, for reform of one kind or another. Civil servants once bought and sold jobs but the "Spoils System" eventually was reformed into a government workforce free of political coercion.

When Teddy Roosevelt determined that trusts were a threat to the American economy, he broke them up. The economy was better for it.

Congress has recognized the need to impose reforms on its own rules, and no longer is it an institution dominated by dictatorial committee chairmen who could kill legislation on a whim.

For all their foresight (and it was considerable) the Founding Fathers couldn't possibly foresee every twist and turn the country would take. Along the way, when things got out of kilter, they were corrected.

We have seen presidential election campaigns in which 200 men donated a total of \$20 million. When people donate that kind of money to any cause, some are likely to come back and ask for something. Big money can turn into big obligations. And we have seen times in our recent past when, in the end, it spelled big trouble. When that happens, we all lose.

Democracy operates on a fragile check-and-balance scale. No single group, no single person, should play the *dominant* role in determining the outcome of an election, how a law is written, which law will be repealed -- or whatever.

Democracy watered down isn't much better than no democracy at all. That's what too much influence by any one side can mean -- a watering down of the process that distorts points of view and pits the narrow interest against the national interest.

In this troubled time of lagging faith in government and institutions, of frustrations and feelings of helplessness, it is not the time to allow our political process to become a lopsided sounding board that can only fuel the fears of the cynical.

There is one thing worse than overlooking an error -- and that is finding it but failing to correct it.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Harkin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized 'T' at the beginning.

*The 2nd Congressional District of Arizona
includes portions of Maricopa and Pinal Counties
and all of Cochise, Pima and Santa Cruz Counties.*

Rep. Morris K. Udall • House of Representatives • Washington, D.C. 20515