

In our view, the first and most basic principle in advocacy was best articulated by Abbie Hoffman, who advised prospective advocates to pick an issue and win it. In our experience, many groups and associations, especially public interest groups with the least resources, try to do a little something on everything, and in the process do little or nothing on anything. Even with an issue such as acid rain, which enjoyed massive public support for many years, both in the polls and from donors, and which governments at all levels called an "environmental time-bomb" and our number one environmental issue, we spent at least as much time fighting bureaucratic inertia and corporate resistance to controls in Canada, as we did in the supposedly more unreceptive arena of Reagan's Washington.

If it took this much effort on an issue whose resolution was universally supported, how much more important is it for groups whose issues are not as visible on the public agenda, to carefully target and focus their efforts?

Our early days in Washington taught us a second important principle, which was to fight hard but do it in good temper. We often observed Senators or Congressmen tearing each other to shreds on the floor in the morning over one bill, and applauded each other's statesmanship in the afternoon on another issue. There seemed to be little room for personal grudges on Capitol Hill: strong rhetoric and criticism were accepted as just some of the tools of doing business. Unfortunately,

the same cannot be said for the business of government in Canada on many days - but more about that later.

This leads us to a third rule which is particularly true of Washington, and that is that there are many more permanent interests on Capitol Hill than there are permanent friends or opponents. This rule has its origins in the fact that Senators and Congressman are alert first and foremost to the interests of their districts, and in the fact that Washington is a transient city whose population comes there to do business, not for the pleasant neighbourhoods or the sightseeing.

As we learned more about how Washington worked, it became increasingly important to observe the next rule. We call it the "After you, Alphonse" principle, by which we mean that if your opponent is heading in a direction which will ultimately benefit you, stand aside. For example, it was a mistake in 1985 for the Canadian government to applaud Ronald Reagan's agreement to appoint acid rain envoys to further study the problem and report back to the President and Prime Minister. Canada's enthusiastic support of this appointment sent entirely the wrong message to Congress about the urgency with which we viewed the problem. And we had to spend much of our time during that year pointing out that further research was precisely what was not needed to solve the problem. Canada should have stood aside.

A related and perhaps even more important rule is that there is a time to fish and a time to mend nets. In the darkest days of the Reagan Administration's opposition to everything environmental, we found there were only a certain number of Capitol Hill offices who were receptive to the need for acid rain controls. It was then time to reduce Washington activity and increase our efforts to encourage clean-up legislation at home. Once this was achieved, and the end of the Reagan tenure became visible on the horizon, it was back to Washington to prepare for a new and more moderate Administration.

As it became time for Canadian polluters and regulators to practice what they preached, many of them choked. This underscores another important rule, particularly in bilateral advocacy: be careful of your friends and learn to capitalize on your opponents' agenda. Canada was always responsible for 50% of its own acid rain problem which was reason enough to get on well with the clean up. At the same time, a long-time and powerful opponent of controls, House of Representatives Energy and Commerce Committee John Dingell, sent a series of detailed letters to Ambassador Allan Gotlieb and then Ontario Environment Minister Keith Norton, inquiring about why the enormous Inco smelter at Sudbury was not being controlled and why the Ontario government had backed off plans for reduction programs. Dingell's inquiries helped put pressure on Canadian governments to look more seriously at cleaning up at home first. Many Canadian legislators and civil servants looked upon Congressman Dingell as an unfair critic of Canadian policies. Maybe

so, but his public embarrassment of our emissions control program has in many respects served this country well.

Because of the need to work in two countries and with several levels of government, we recognized another rule early on: resolution of large and complex issues requires a diverse constituency who need common guiding principles. In our case, our message to new Coalition member groups was simple: leave your disagreements and ideological differences with other Coalition members at the door, and find your common areas of agreement. I recall one occasion when a spirited debate began in a Coalition Board of Governors meeting over the value of nuclear power. Our President immediately called the debating parties to order and asked them politely but firmly to continue their discussion after the meeting. They both agreed, and we were able to pursue Coalition business without further interruptions.

Throughout all our work with Coalition member groups and with the Canadian public, we always tried to look for facts and images about acid rain which could unite people and which could speak to their enlightened self-interest. Rather than scaring people into action through use of images of dead trees, dead fish, and crumbling buildings, we used images of the cottage, the camp, the lakes: in other words, a vision of what it is we were trying to protect or save, rather than what had already gone wrong.

Our last two rules are the shortest, but in some ways the most important: keep it simple and thank your helpers. There was always a way to demystify or decomplexify a complicated scientific issue, either by a simple image, careful refining of scientific fact, or the use of a particularly articulate spokesperson.

And when one of our constituents was particularly helpful, we took time to thank them and recognize them in front of the rest of the group. And we didn't wait until the end of the campaign to do so. Public interest advocacy is draining enough by itself -- you need to have fun at the same time, and remember that volunteers are often motivated by the social dimension of their work.

And now to some of the observations and lessons we've taken away from 10 years of advocacy learned.

The first and most important is that no matter what public relations tools or rhetorical flourishes you use, you really can't schmooze the troops. At the end of the day, the Canadian public usually has a pretty good sense on whether they are being given the straight goods, or whether someone's off-loading hot air. The many promises and statements of intent from various levels of government in the early 1980's about their plans to control acid rain didn't fool any major sector of the Canadian public. In fact, even today many Canadian don't believe that the legislation that is in place to control acid rain is either there, or will have any effect.

The second general observation which arises from the first is that in this country there seems to be a tendency to talk about doing business rather than to do it. We spent much of our time analyzing the various promises and statements of intent from a variety of ministers, for substantive information about plans for regulatory limits on acid rain-causing emissions. On many days, we came up empty and had to redouble our efforts in Canada to nail the specifics of programs. And we find the same tendency today in our work as environmental advisors for private clients.

It flourishes, for example, in the form of the National Roundtable on Environment and the Economy and the federal government's Green Plan, neither of which have removed an ounce of pollutants from our air or water. Much of what is being served up under these programs amounts to environmental junk food. They are expensive, of poor quality, and likely to lead to problems down the road. Even federal legislation is not immune from this tendency: the Canadian Environmental Protection Act set a priority list of 44 toxic substances for evaluation in 1989, but only one evaluation has been completed to date.

Needless to say, our experience in Washington taught us a lot about lobbying. First and foremost, we learned the extent to which the U.S. government expects scrutiny, accountability, and oversight, to the point where it has created a sophisticated (indeed, some would say over-complex) system of regulation of lobbying, not only of domestic interest groups but of foreign agents as well. In Canada, we found an

assumption, particularly at the federal government level, that scrutiny is offensive and inappropriate. Federal officials often seemed to be personally offended at having to talk to us, particularly if there was any possibility that we would say anything in public about their plans or intentions.

This attitude may arise in part from the fact that in Canada, it is important to maintain party line, and not only in government. In the environmental community, the business community and the labour movement, public disagreements with established doctrine are often severely sanctioned, irrespective of their legitimacy. When we turned our efforts to Canadian sources of acid rain pollution in the mid-eighties, and had occasion to point out that Canada was lagging behind the U.S. in certain areas, such as controls on Inco or on the motor vehicle industry, the honeymoon years with both federal and provincial governments came to an abrupt end. Gone were the invitations to wine and cheese parties at the Canadian Embassy in Washington. But in return, as the Canadian control program began to take shape, we could hold our heads up on Capitol Hill. Best of all, we'd taken control and obtained some relief for our lakes, fish, and forests while we waited for the American program to kick in.

We also learned early on that Canadians look to government to solve virtually every problem, particularly where money is concerned. There may be good reasons for this, but it's anathema in Washington, where if you're a public interest group and

you've taken money from the U.S. government, you've sold out. We had to exercise extreme care in funding all our U.S. activities only with money from individual donors or the private sector.

And while we are on the matter of money, we should dispense with the notion that environment takes precedence over economics for any government. Indeed, for this federal government in particular, economics triumphed over environment on practically any day of the week. This lesson was brought home to us forcefully when the Canadian Ambassador in Washington's public presence on the acid rain issue evaporated for 2 years during the free trade debate. During the two years it took to negotiate the Free Trade Agreement, the Ambassador made one speech on acid rain - though this was supposedly the Canadian government's highest-priority bilateral environmental issue.

Another version of the triumph of economics over environment was a particularly memorable visit by the federal Energy Minister to Washington, during which he was scheduled to meet with U.S. government officials to advocate acid rain controls in the morning, and with some of the same people in the afternoon to try to sell Canadian asbestos, a substance which had been banned by the U.S. government.

The general problem of rhetoric versus reality was not confined to our dealings with governments. On many days we found ourselves asking (in the words of Adèle's

mother) "why does God give almonds to people with no teeth?" Such people inhabit several very large, unmentionable, heavily-funded Canadian associations, which often talked a good game on acid rain publicly, but in fact did nothing on the issue except to use it as a fund-raising gimmick. We managed to elbow a few of them out of our way. The rest we figured would just have to live with themselves. I'm sure this problem isn't unique to the environmental area.

The past decade has been for us a tremendously exciting and instructive period in our lives. It could not have been so without the unconditional support in good and bad times from people like John Fraser, many members of the Coalition Board of Directors, and many individual Canadians who sent in a few dollars, or their best wishes when they couldn't afford money. We've taken care to struggle against the workaholic and other obsessive behaviours which plague the public interest movement.

And we've been fortunate to have avoided the outsider mentality which also affects many public interest groups. In many ways, our work has been a way of trying to repay Canada for all it has given both ourselves and our families.

A special piece of writing by Edward Abbey, which we both consult periodically, helps explain our longevity and might be of interest to you. We'd like to close our presentation by sharing it with you.

"Do not burn yourselves out. Be as I am - a reluctant enthusiast, a part-time crusader, a half-hearted fanatic. Save the other half of yourselves and your lives for pleasure and adventure. It is not enough to fight for, what you believe in: it is even more important to enjoy it. While you can. While its still there. So get out there and mess around with your friends, ramble out yonder and explore the forests, encounter the grizzly, climb the mountains, bag the peaks, run the rivers, breathe deep of that yet sweet and lucid air, sit quietly for a while and contemplate the precious stillness, that lovely mysterious and awesome space. Enjoy yourselves, keep your brain in your head and your head firmly attached to the body, the body active and alive, and I promise you this one sweet victory over our enemies, over those desk-bound people with their hearts in a safe deposit box and their eyes hypnotized by desk calculators. I promise you this, you will outlive the bastards!"

**Notes for an Address by Michael Perley
to the
National Conference on Government Relations**

Chateau Laurier

**Ottawa, Ontario
October 2, 1991**