

## Uncommon Hypocrisy

*Common Cause claims to seek good government but prefers big government*

By Barbara Joanna Lucas

**Summary:** *Common Cause was sired by an architect of the Great Society, so it's no wonder this grande dame of "good government" groups is willing to sacrifice its own principles to boost big government and smear conservatives. Yet the mainstream media are always happy to parrot the line that the group floats high above politics.*

At its founding, Common Cause described itself as a "nationwide, independent, non-partisan organization" that would be a watchdog of powerful politicians and push good government policies for ordinary people. The organization's website still displays its founding document, which proclaims, "We want public officials to have literally millions of American citizens looking over their shoulders at every move they make. We want phones to ring in Washington and state capitols and town halls. We want people watching and influencing every move that government makes."

That's the kind of talk that would fire up a Tea Party rally or almost any conservative organization, and indeed, Common Cause has led efforts on laws to protect government whistleblowers, strengthen the Freedom of Information Act, and it has attacked crony capitalism. Sounds better and better, but not so fast.

For every good policy the group backs, often in the vaguest terms, it supports a dozen or so other loathsome policies. It calls for good government, but seeks to achieve it by empowering big government—which historically has done nothing but create opportunities for more corruption.



**At a Demos gala last year: Common Cause President Miles Rapoport (right), Marxist academic-activist Frances Fox Piven (center), and Janet Dewart Bell, Demos board member and widow of Derrick Bell, an Obama mentor.**

Over the more than four decades since its founding, the organization has made it one of its highest priorities to limit the political speech of individual Americans through various campaign finance reform ruses and various "media reform" schemes, all of which would allow government to have a hand in news content. It has also been hostile toward even the most modest election integrity laws.

### New President, Old Politics

Common Cause recently gained new leadership when Miles Rapoport became president in March. He is a former Democratic secretary of state and state legislator in Connecticut. Most recently, Rapoport was the

president of Demos, a left-wing advocacy and research group.

It's no surprise that the new president would be a Democratic politician. The last three presidents of the supposedly "independent, nonpartisan" organization have been Demo-

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**CONTENTS**

Common Cause

Page 1

Briefly Noted

Page 6

# Organization Trends

cratic politicians, one of whom went on to be involved in the kind of scandal for which she used to criticize other politicians.

Similarly, the chairman of Common Cause's National Governing Board is Robert Reich, the former Clinton administration secretary of labor, a losing Democratic candidate for governor of Massachusetts, and author of *Reason: Why Liberals Will Win the Battle for America*. Reich routinely condemns capitalism as a failed economic system, and his only criticism of the catastrophe known as Obamacare is that it's not a fully socialist, single-payer system.

The Supreme Court's ruling in the *Citizens United* free speech case wiped out much of what Common Cause worked 40 years to achieve. The group led the effort to launch our modern election law mess when it helped pass the 1974 Federal Election Campaign Act. It continued the harm with its intimate involvement in the notorious McCain-Feingold campaign finance "reform" bill in 2002. It also helped pass similar legislation in a number of states. But Common Cause hit some financial stumbling blocks and closed several state chapters after its mission appeared largely accomplished. Thus the setback of the *Citizens United* case turned into a boon because it allowed the group to

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create new bogeymen with which to raise money.

Part of this revival has involved pushing what it calls a "Blueprint for a Great Democracy," which Common Cause announced in December 2013. The group claims it will "examine the 21<sup>st</sup> Century challenges to the model of 'government of, by and for the people.'" Not surprisingly, the initial conference for developing the blueprint focused on "the power of money in American politics."

Lest there be any question whether Common Cause is a non-ideological group, consider the man who is honored in the endowment that will underwrite this blueprint. "We're excited at this opportunity, provided by the generous support of the Why Not Initiative and its George S. McGovern Great Government Endowment, to step back and re-examine obstacles to democracy reform and develop new ways to overcome them," Karen Hobert Flynn, Common Cause's senior vice president for strategy and programs, said in December. "Our goal is to build consensus around reforms that work and strategies for achieving them." The endowment will fund McGovern Democracy Fellows, "each of whom will study and work on reforms designed to increase civic engagement and accountability in government."

With 35 current state chapters, the organization can tout a number of what it considers accomplishments, namely, pushing restrictions on campaign donations in many of those states, including Arizona, Connecticut, New Jersey, and New Mexico. These "reforms" are often enacted after corruption scandals. And yet, just as most gun control laws proposed after a mass shooting would have done nothing to prevent the tragedy, the corruption scandals in most states had nothing to do with campaign contributions and so would not have been prevented by Common Cause's new laws.

## **Common Cause History**

Common Cause was founded by liberal Republican John Gardner, after he served as President Lyndon B. Johnson's Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (the agency is now named the Department of Health and Human Services). In that role, Gardner led

the key department imposing Johnson's Great Society debacle on the country.

One gauge of how strong a progressive mindset Gardner possessed: he once griped, "we can discredit the extreme individualism that has wreaked such havoc on the whole concept of community." Similarly, when announcing the creation of Common Cause on August 18, 1970, Gardner asserted that "everybody's organized but the people." He issued a public letter asking for help in his effort to make government more responsive to the common person.

"The first thing Common Cause will do is to assist you to speak and act in behalf of legislation designed to solve the nation's problems," the letter said. "We are going to build a true citizens' lobby—a lobby concerned not with the advancement of special interests but with the well-being of the nation.... We must bring about a renaissance in politics ... Does that seem inordinately ambitious? It is. This is no time for small plans."

In six months, 100,000 people had become members. But government reform isn't what drew them. Building membership behind any cause at that time required advocating for the era's trendiest cause—ending America's involvement in the Vietnam War. Gardner called Vietnam "the most important issue in the nation today," and Common Cause threw its resources behind lobbying Congress to cut off funding for the war.

In 1971, the group sued both the Democratic and Republican parties, alleging they violated campaign fundraising and spending laws. This was enough to get Gardner on Nixon's enemies list, according to a fawning PBS documentary on Gardner and Common Cause. As the Watergate scandal raged, the group received a mountain of publicity because many Americans were now looking for a good government group.

Common Cause was one of the first organizations in the United States to set up permanent phone banks to push its members to contact members of Congress on its agenda items.

It also organized letter-writing campaigns. (*Washington Post*, May 31, 2004)

The group's early legislative successes included leading the fight for the passage of the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment to change the legal voting age from 21 to 18; the 1974 partial public funding of presidential campaigns; and new ethics laws for members of Congress in 1978.

The ever "nonpartisan" group returned to dovish national security policies in the 1980s, when it opposed the Reagan administration's defense build-up. The group's website still promotes the fact that in 1985, "After leading a major grassroots campaign against the MX missile, Common Cause plays a lead role in convincing Congress to cap at 50 the number of MX missiles, after coming close to nearly killing the program outright." The group also orchestrated a massive letter-writing campaign to kill the Strategic Defense Initiative, a space-based missile defense system which critics mocked as "Star Wars" during the 1980s. (*Washington Post*, May 31, 2004)

Five years after it achieved its grandest accomplishment with the passage of the McCain-Feingold law signed by President George W. Bush, Common Cause credited itself with another success. It boasted that it had pushed through an ethics bill for Congress that would establish an independent Office of Congressional Ethics.

### Only Liberals in Leadership

The group consistently calls itself a nonpartisan watchdog, claiming it gets under the skin of both parties. Hardly. The immediate past president was another Democratic politician, former Pennsylvania Rep. Bob Edgar, who had previously headed the left-wing National Council of Churches and who died unexpectedly last year. In March 2012, Edgar led Common Cause to lock hands with the Occupy Wall Street movement, future New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, and various other pro-campaign finance groups such as Public Citizen at a Washington rally where they threatened to boycott corporations that contributed to political campaigns in 2012. Oddly, the rally's sponsor was the Service Employees International Union (SEIU),

which spends millions of dollars on elections every year. (*The Hill*, March 12, 2012) "We plan to let corporations know that there will be a great cost to playing politics," Edgar said at the rally.

Among the past chairmen of the Common Cause board are such noted liberals as Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox and bestselling author Richard North Peterson, a former government lawyer who pushes a left-leaning message in his novels. To give the group a slight cover of bipartisanship, the group once had as chairman former House Financial Services Committee chairman Jim Leach (R-Iowa), a moderate who endorsed Barack Obama for president in 2008. Board members include Hollywood liberal Richard Dreyfuss as well as former left-wing Rep. Pat Schroeder (D-Colo.).

But one need only look at Common Cause's funders to realize it is pushing progressive-friendly causes. The donor list includes a who's who of wealthy left-wing philanthropies. George Soros has given the group \$2,025,000 since 2000 through his Open Society Foundations (formerly Open Society Institute) and \$600,000 since 2009 through his Foundation to Promote Open Society. Arca Foundation, which used to be run by Rep. Donna Edwards (D-Md.), has given the group \$1,395,000 since 2000 (for more on Arca, see *Foundation Watch*, October 2011).

Other foundations that have given money to Common Cause are Carnegie Corp. of New York (\$1,810,000 since 2001), Joyce Foundation (\$1,480,000 since 2003), San Francisco-based James Irvine Foundation (\$1,375,000 since 2005), Ford Foundation (\$685,000 since 2000), and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (\$309,093 since 2002). The group has also received anonymous funding from major donor-advised fund providers like the Fidelity Investments Charitable Gift Fund (\$579,500 since 2003) and the Vanguard Charitable Endowment Program (\$506,500 since 2006).

Other big organizations bankrolling Common Cause are the GE Foundation (General Electric is among the nation's biggest beneficiaries of crony capitalism) and the Sulzberger Foundation, named for the lib-

eral family that owns The New York Times Company.

As much as Common Cause claims to deplore big money and political corruption, that principle evidently can't compete with the bottom line. Former New Jersey Gov. Jon Corzine (D) reportedly contributed to the group about a month after the collapse of his MF Global firm under suspicious circumstances. (*Washington Free Beacon*, April 26, 2012)

Another disreputable politician to throw his money behind Common Cause was former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, a South Dakota Democrat married to corporate lobbyist Linda Daschle. The former senator helped sponsor a fundraising dinner for Common Cause in 2011, according to the group's own website. Two years earlier, Daschle had to withdraw his nomination to be Secretary of Health and Human Services because of his failure to pay \$128,000 in taxes on a private car and driver provided by a Democratic donor.

The late Texas trial attorney Fred Baron, who was caught up in trying to help disgraced former senator and presidential candidate John Edwards cover up an affair, was listed in the 2005-2006 Annual report as a donor. In 2011, Common Cause supported the indictment against Edwards, saying he "appears to have raised nearly \$1 million from a pair of political supporters [Bunny Mellon and Baron] to finance an elaborate cover up of his affair."

Outside of the Sulzberger family, other prominent liberal media barons have promoted Common Cause. Katrina vanden Heuvel, editor and publisher of *The Nation*, a prominent far-left magazine, contributed to Common Cause in 2011. Meanwhile, PBS host and former LBJ aide Bill Moyers, as well as one-time cable mogul and CNN founder Ted Turner, have each served on the Common Cause event committee. Let there be any doubt this is not a nonpartisan group, Barbra Streisand's financial support provides a final nail in that coffin.

When it comes to money going the other direction, consider that since 2008 Common Cause employees have made \$19,804 in

# Organization Trends

political contributions—with every penny going to Democratic candidates, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

The Common Cause empire consists of two similarly sized entities: Common Cause, a 501(c)(4) “social welfare” group, and Common Cause Education Fund, a 501(c)(3) “public charity.” In their most recent publicly available tax returns for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2013, the former group reported \$5,708,903 in revenue and \$6,154,139 in expenses, while the Education Fund claimed total revenues of \$5,556,464 and expenses of \$5,173,726.

## Political Lynchings

Common Cause publicly calls for a transformation of politics, but it has routinely participated in the kind of ugly witch hunts, character assassinations, and smears that turn regular Americans off politics. For example, one means that Common Cause has used to raise money is by smearing the American Legislative Exchange Commission (ALEC), a national research organization for state legislators across the country. (The Left’s coordinated assault on ALEC was chronicled in *Organization Trends*, December 2013.)

The organization still boasts about its participation in the original Borking operation in 1987. On its website’s timeline, it proclaims how that year it “Work[ed] with civil rights groups to successfully oppose the nomination of Robert Bork to the U.S. Supreme Court.” Recall that in hindsight, the smearing of Bork is widely seen as having set a new standard in political hatchet jobs. Now, in the aftermath of the *Citizens United* case, Common Cause is going after sitting Justices Clarence Thomas and Antonin Scalia, claiming their speeches to the Federalist Society somehow violate the Judicial Code of Ethics.

“Common Cause’s focus on the Supreme Court grew out of a landmark campaign finance case, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* that in early 2010 lifted the ban on corporate and union spending on political campaigns,” a Common Cause press release says. “The ruling sent a flood of corporate and undisclosed money into the mid-term elections, drowning out the voices of ordinary Americans.”

“In Congress, at the Supreme Court and at the Department of Justice, Common Cause is pressing for new laws and procedures to make Supreme Court justices live by the same code of ethics that covers other federal judges,” the release adds.

So how is a Justice’s speaking to a group of lawyers at the Federalist Society a scandal? Common Cause explains that by use of Sen. Harry Reid’s favorite bogeyman: “Justices Clarence Thomas and Antonin Scalia, who sided with the majority in that case, have ties to a major beneficiary of the decision, Koch Industries, one of the largest privately held corporations in the nation,” the release continues.

Common Cause consistently attacks the Koch brothers simply for contributing to pro-free enterprise causes that Common Cause doesn’t approve of. The traditional notion that the antidote to speech you don’t like is counter-speech in the public arena seems a foreign concept to Common Cause. If its view doesn’t win, that can only mean someone else must have had an unfair advantage.

ALEC is perhaps the best demonstration of this narrow minded view. In a fundraising appeal, Common Cause said, “Have you met ALEC?” In reality, ALEC promotes limited government ideas at the state level among legislators. That makes it a “secretive front group.” The fundraising appeal goes on to say, “We’re working hard to shine a spotlight on their nefarious tactics, and to put a stop to their end runs around federal tax and state ethics laws. Can you help us by making a gift of \$20, \$50, \$100 or more to support our work today?”

In its own report from 2011, ALEC states, “In sum, Common Cause has filed frivolous complaints with federal and state authorities to give their campaign against ALEC the color of official credibility, and is now wielding these sham charges as a sword to garner added credibility from mainstream media outlets. As the fundraising appeal shows, Common Cause has a clear financial interest in elevating its campaign against ALEC.”

In 2012, Common Cause sued ALEC under the Tax Whistleblower Act, alleging ALEC

underreported its lobbying activities. Common Cause also attacked ALEC for supporting the “stand your ground” self-defense law that was thrown into the national spotlight after George Zimmerman shot and killed Trayvon Martin. (After Zimmerman testified that he was defending himself, he was ultimately acquitted of second-degree murder by a Florida jury).

In a brazenly tasteless and exploitative statement, a Common Cause spokesman told *BusinessWeek*, “The Trayvon Martin thing was like a gift.” No matter where one comes down on the Zimmerman verdict, the death of a teenager is never a gift, no matter how noble liberals may feel their cause is.

## Getting Out the Vote, Legit or Not

At times, Common Cause doesn’t even attempt to hide its partisanship, such as during the 2009 inauguration of President Barack Obama. At that time the group announced in its annual report that it was “pleased to partner with Ben & Jerry’s to celebrate the inauguration of President Obama and America’s opportunity for change. Ben & Jerry’s renamed its butter pecan flavor ‘Yes Pecan!’ for the month of January and donated the associated scoop-shop proceeds to the Common Cause Education Fund,” the group’s 501(c)(3) arm. The cover of that annual report declared, “Drop Everything and Vote,” and boasted about its “Protect the Vote” initiative.

“For the 2008 election, Common Cause greatly expanded its ‘protect the vote’ efforts initiated in previous election cycles,” the group said in the annual report. “We released three major studies that highlighted potential Election Day voting problems and provided an analytical frame for local and national media.” The group boasted :

\*“In Colorado, we fought through the courts to successfully re-enfranchise 44,000 voters who had been illegally purged from the rolls in the weeks preceding the election.”

\*“In Florida, we set up phone banks and reached out to 12,000 voters who were purged from state voter rolls due to the burdensome registration requirements of the ‘no match/ no vote’ law.”

\*“In Virginia, we uncovered an effort to deceive minority Democrats into voting on the wrong day. We responded rapidly the weekend prior to Election Day by recruiting actor/activist Danny Glover to tape a phone message alerting voters in more than 325,000 homes across Virginia and Pennsylvania about this misinformation campaign, and urging them to vote on Nov. 4.”

\*“In Georgia, we launched a phone and mail outreach campaign that provided critical support to 15,000 voters most vulnerable to disenfranchisement in the face of that state’s strict voter ID requirements.”

\*“In the six key swing states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, Florida, North Carolina and Colorado, we enlisted thousands of students across 27 campuses in a successful effort to motivate young voters and disseminate critical voter rights information.”

## Not Living Up To Its Own Standards

It seems ironic that Common Cause and similar groups raise millions of dollars from wealthy, influential people like George Soros in the name of combating big money in politics. These groups proclaim their disdain for lobbyists, yet spend much of their time lobbying for various campaign finance laws, the FAIR Elections Now Act, and so on. Admittedly, passing laws is important for anyone who wants to change public policy, but it would be nice if Common Cause could agree that they aren’t the only ones who should be allowed to argue for and against new laws.

What’s less understandable is the fact that Common Cause is packed with former politicians and lobbyists that frequently fail to live up to the lofty standards that Common Cause claims to adhere to. For instance, another member of the group’s board is former Rep. Butler Derrick (D-S.C.), who was a registered lobbyist from 1998 to 2011. His clients included energy, insurance, pharmaceutical, and financial interest firms. One of those clients was Derivium Capital, a South Carolina firm that shut its doors in 2005 and left participants in its loan program with hundreds of millions in combined losses.

Another Common Cause board member, Harold Pachios, was a registered lobbyist from 2002 to 2011 in Maine for the firm Preti, Flaherty, Beliveau, Pachios & Harley. His clients included financial firms, green energy companies, insurance companies and the Soap Detergent Association. Former Rep. Pat Schroeder was a registered lobbyist when she was president and CEO of the Association of American Publishers from 1998 to 2008.

A former Common Cause national president, Chellie Pingree, used her position in the organization to climb the political ladder. She is now a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Maine. As expected, she denounced gifts from lobbyists to members of Congress when she ran Common Cause. When she made it to Congress, she took frequent flights on the private jet owned by lobbyist Donald Sussman. Her excuse? Sussman, chairman of the billion-dollar hedge fund Paloma Partners, was her boyfriend (*Portland Press-Herald*, Sept. 23, 2010). The two have since wed.

As Common Cause president, Pingree told Congress in 2006, “Most Americans never have and never will fly on a chartered jet, much less a fancy corporate jet complete with wet bar and leather couches. So when members of Congress constantly fly around on corporate jets and pay only the cost of a commercial ticket, it contributes to the corrosive public perception that members of Congress are more like the fat cats of Wall Street than they are like the rest of us.”

The *Portland Press-Herald* reported that Pingree’s jet-setting might violate House ethics rules, which state that “members and staff may not accept expenses from a private source for travel the primary purpose of which is to conduct official business.” Her spokesman Willy Ritch told the newspaper, “When Chellie was elected to Congress, she checked with the House Ethics Committee and they assured her that, because Donald is her partner, the travel is allowable under House Rules and does not need to be reported.”

But shouldn’t someone who championed ethics hold herself to a higher standard

than simply finding out if it’s technically legal or not?

Like Pingree, Common Cause is hypocritical. Perhaps somewhere along the way, the organization forgot its own goals, or simply gained an ideological blind spot because the big-government politics of progressivism so often drives corruption. In reality, Common Cause is everything its supporters despise. It is intimately entangled with a vast network of lobbyists and politicians, is aggressively partisan, raises money from shady characters, and engages in vicious political smears.

It may pretend to occupy a high moral plane, but Common Cause is just another example of Washington politics as usual.

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# Briefly Noted

Cincinnati-area members of **Al Sharpton's National Action Network (NAN)** made headlines when they embraced one of their own: serial vote fraud felon **Melowese Richardson**. At a "voting rights" rally, Richardson was called to the stage and given a hero's welcome after NAN campaigned to free her less than a year into her five-year prison term. The group argued that she received an inappropriately harsh sentence because she is black. At the event Sharpton accused Republicans of trying to suppress the vote, saying it "is all a scheme to disempower and disenfranchise the vote in Ohio." The **MSNBC** bloviator said, "Nobody gave us the right to vote and nobody is going to give it to us now. We fought for it and we're going to fight for our right to keep it."

Sharpton himself was recently outed as an **FBI** informant (he claims his life was threatened by gangsters) by The Smoking Gun website. Sharpton was referred to in FBI documents as "C1-7"—short for confidential informant #7—in secret court filings. "In those documents, investigators vouched for him as a reliable, productive, and accurate source of information about underworld figures," the website reports.

**Judicial Watch** released internal IRS documents revealing that former **IRS** official **Lois Lerner** communicated with the **Department of Justice (DOJ)** about whether it was possible to criminally prosecute certain conservative and Tea Party tax-exempt entities. The documents were obtained as a result of an October 2013 Freedom of Information Act lawsuit that Judicial Watch filed against the IRS after the agency refused to respond to four FoIA requests dating back to May 2013.

Maryland-based blogger **Jeff Quinton** reports that Rep. **Elijah Cummings** (D-Md.), who has been defending the IRS throughout the Lerner saga, is a federal tax deadbeat. In the mid-1990s, the IRS filed court papers declaring that Cummings was legally obliged to pay more than \$30,000 in back taxes. Years later he paid up. Cummings also allegedly violated campaign finance law by having a donor co-sign a loan that supplied \$15,000 for his first House campaign.

Left-wing groups are targeting the more conservative members of the U.S. Supreme Court in hopes of forcing them to limit corporations' First Amendment rights to express themselves politically. One of the groups, **Progressive Change Campaign Committee**, is running class warfare-oriented ads encouraging supporters to back legislation that would fund political candidates with tax dollars, a "reform" it says is necessary because the Supreme Court recently overturned some campaign donation limits. "With those [campaign donation] limits gone, it will be even harder for everyday people to have their voices heard in Washington," the ads say. PCCC favors the proposed "Government by the People Act," which would match small-dollar donations with public funds. "The Left clearly tried to work the refs on the Affordable Care Act," **Georgetown University Law Center** professor **Randy Barnett** says, using a sports analogy. "They worked the refs after Citizens United, which helped set things up for the Affordable Care Act challenge.... It's unfortunate, I think, that they've been encouraged in this behavior by its apparent success."

The **Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's** decision to include an acknowledged socialist on one of its boards has enraged conservatives. An official from the libertarian-leaning **Cato Institute** says the pick shows how the agency selects people who "echo its own viewpoints." **Ron Ehrenreich**, a 1988 vice presidential candidate for the **Socialist Party USA** and currently CEO of the **Syracuse Cooperative Federal Credit Union**, is part of the bureau's Credit Union Advisory Council. Cato's director of financial regulation studies, **Mark Calabria**, is concerned that the CFPB has "gone out of its way" to create an echo chamber. "To me, I think it really speaks to very deep-seated groupthink over there that consumers are being exploited, and markets are bad, and if you don't have lots of government regulations and lawyers, then people are going to be taken advantage of."