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The Governor's Constituency For Children: Concerned Adults Unite in Lobbying Efforts

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Abstract

In the political lexicon of the 1980s, a "constituency" has come to mean a special interest group coalesced around a single issue. These single-issue constituencies, or special interest lobbies, range from right wing to left wing, from neighborhood associations to well-organized political action committees, from environmental causes to tax-slashing referenda.

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In the political lexicon of the 1980s, a "constituency" has come to mean a special interest group coalesced around a single issue. These single-issue constituencies, or special interest lobbies, range from right wing to left wing, from neighborhood associations to well-organized political action committees, from environmental causes to tax-slashing referenda. Although "special interest" is a phrase now given a pejorative connotation, the political climate of America has made single-issue, special interest groups an efficient means for participation in the process of government. In an era of decline in party influence and ascendancy of media campaigns, a sixty-second message must be concise and simple. Similarly, the special interest groups' message to politicians is concise and simple: this is our issue and we measure good government by its adherence to our point of view. Whether a candidate campaigns with the help of special interest money or gets media exposure by railing against special interest money, the special interests have taken center stage. More to the point, they have been given it.

Business interests, senior citizen voting blocs, minority rights groups, right-to-life organizations, animal protection and similar societies exist, after all, because the right to speak out is an American tradition. Whether we adore or abhor the phenomenon of this caucus or that caucus influencing our public priorities, single-issue constituencies are the building blocks of power. As varied as these single-issue constituencies are, they share two common characteristics: first, they are composed of adults, and second, their members know enough to manipulate the system to, if not respond to their demands, at least acknowledge the existence of their cause.

Children have no such advantage. Yet children, who constitute a substantial minority, can neither comprehend nor articulate their own needs. Most assuredly, no one will say he is against children. However, the reality is that when budgets have to be cut, children cannot lobby

* In collaboration with the Honorable William E. Gladstone, Judge, Eleventh Judicial Circuit, Miami, Florida.

to save the programs that help them and children cannot vote the people out of office who cut those programs. Adults must therefore coalesce around the needs of all children and not leave their welfare at the door of the schoolhouse, the steps of the social service office, or the threshold of government. Those who are able to speak for the needs of children must take their message into the corporate boardrooms and government meeting halls and make it the focus of growth management, taxation, and public policy.

Although there are groups in Florida which address the needs of children on an issue-by-issue basis—education, child abuse, juvenile justice—a mechanism to unite all the efforts on behalf of children has been lacking. The recent creation of a Constituency for Children by Governor Bob Graham and the Florida Legislature signals an end to earlier fragmented efforts. It is a call for action and involvement by all segments of the adult population who realize that they are ignoring their future at their own peril. As Governor Graham stated, “the more children we can help to grow up physically healthy, intellectually curious and free from crime, the fewer we will have to arrest, prosecute, adjudicate and incarcerate.”

The Governor’s Constituency for Children is a blueprint for creating new relationships: first, between government and voluntary agencies and traditional special interest groups, especially business; and second, between this Constituency and all children. The Constituency for Children concept, and its success, hinges on two factors not previously incorporated in efforts on behalf of children: the inclusion of concerned individuals, business and community leaders and the pairing of those leaders with social work case managers in representative case studies. Community and business leaders have the proven ability to get things done. Witness the very successful Dade County Citizens Against Crime, as an example. Business and government teamed up and focused on an issue which was plaguing the community. It was the persistence of this leadership structure that brought resources old and new to bear on resolving the problem. An equally representative Constituency for Children can expect similar efficacy on behalf of children. When the Constituency in turn selects one or more representative cases and resolves life problems for one child a pattern for assisting thousands will be at hand. And when the Constituency sees, by its active involvement, that current resources are stretched as far as they can go or there is a gap in the system it will know how to effect changes. In addition to assuring that adequate resources are available to serve children and families in need, one of the Constituency’s primary functions

will be to improve the coordination of public programs already in place. To put it bluntly, adults need to utilize the clout of the leadership structure to keep the cause of children in the forefront of policy decisions.

The Constituency, then, is a coalition of any and all adults and children starting with school superintendents, Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) leaders, civic organizations, business groups, professional and religious organizations, court systems and social service representatives, all joined by their interest in children. Only the power structure can provide opportunity to a child who requires psychological treatment, job training, a job, basic necessities, counseling, and self-esteem. The Constituency will improve and perpetuate the quality of life in Florida communities by focusing energies on a single issue: our children.

If, as has been observed, all politics are local, then by extension all worthwhile political efforts are similarly local. The Constituency is essentially a local mandate. It needs to be organized with the strength of the grass roots and the clout of leadership at the community level, with problems to be resolved at that level whenever possible. Local constituencies will need to organize and fund themselves, but will have the technical assistance of the state level Constituency whenever necessary. As Governor Graham has stated, "[t]he Constituency for Children will organize county by county. It will solve local needs at a local level whenever possible. It will point out shortfalls that require state action when local efforts are not enough."

The Florida Legislature authorized the creation of the Governor's Constituency for Children at the close of the 1983 session. As a matter of design and necessity, the only expenditure of state funds will be for the executive director and essential staff at the state level. The state council of the constituency will be structured with permanent and rotating members. The Governor is the chairman, and will appoint someone outside of government to be the vice chairman. The permanent members of the state council, all heads of the departments whose programs and agencies affect children, are Education Commissioner Ralph Turlington, Attorney General Jim Smith, HRS Secretary David Pin-gree, Labor Secretary Wally Orr, Community Affairs Secretary John DeGrove and Administration Secretary Nevin Smith, in whose department the program is housed. The remaining sixteen members of the state council will be either elected by local councils or appointed by the governor. In the formative stages of this program the governor has appointed an organizational committee, the members of which are: Judge

Theodore Bruno, Escambia County; Harold Henderson, Gadsden County; Helene Coleman, Duval County; Dr. Gerald Schiebler, Alachua County; Jack Eckerd, Pinellas County; Robin Gibson, Polk County; Joan Nabors, Brevard County; Judge Hugh Glickstein, Broward County; Berta Bleck, Dade County; Judge William E. Gladstone, Dade County; Ellen Hoffenberg, Leon County; Margaret Kempel, Dade County; and Coleen Bevis, Hillsborough County. The executive director of the governor's Constituency for Children is Samuel "Buddy" Streit, who assumed his duties in the Department of Administration on November 10, 1983.

The Constituency for Children is you. It is everyone who has prepared an article for this special edition of the *Nova Law Journal*, everyone who is taking the time to read this special edition, Judge Hugh Glickstein and the members of the Florida Bar Board of Governors' Special Committee for the Needs of Children, all task force members, committee members, in short, all knowledgeable and concerned people. Many details must evolve as the program grows and develops. The legal community can be very helpful by assisting local communities in setting up the non-profit mechanisms for making the constituency work in all areas of the state. The task involves a serious commitment of time and energy.

While Florida may be the third largest state in the union by the turn of the century, it risks not being the third in quality of life or abundant opportunity unless its best resource, its children, are the focus of planning efforts. The two major state agencies which most directly address the needs of children, the Department of Education and HRS, face the constant threat of reduced funding. Efforts to maintain and improve services in some instances, have amounted to little more than running in place. Your involvement in the Constituency for Children is of vital and immediate importance because the 1984 Florida legislative session will be a critical one for the children of Florida. The speaker-designate, Representative James Harold Thompson, is the chairman of the Select Committee on Family and Youth which is composed of the chairs of all the substantive committees dealing with these issues in the Florida House of Representatives. The select committee was designated during the 1983 session, but did not have the time or the resources to accomplish its goals. In this session the committee will have a staff director and it is hoped that the work of this committee will have significant impact on other programs and agencies. The Constituency for Children should play a pivotal role in facilitating the work of this committee and helping to ensure that its goals of meeting the

needs of Florida children are met. As Governor Bob Graham has declared, “[t]he Constituency for Children is. . .a noble experiment to knit together the strands of state and local policy affecting a vital part of Florida’s future—our children.”**

** During the 1983 legislative session a very detailed concept paper for the Constituency was prepared. A copy of this, and any other information, is available from Mr. Streit at 904-488-4116. His mailing address is Governor’s Constituency for Children, Department of Administration, 435 Carlton Building, Tallahassee, Florida 32301. If this article and the others in this issue have convinced you of the many needs of children in this state, please contact Mr. Streit as soon as possible so that the Constituency in your community may share your expertise, talents, and special interest.