

Challenges for Nonprofit Congress

Nonprofits should be leading the charge for social change and social justice.

By Rick Cohen

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It's a sign of the times, a desire to escape from the virulent red-state/blue-state hostility of national politics.

In the nonprofit sector, the search is on for one message, a call for one voice.

The Independent Sector Nonprofit Panel strove mightily to represent its deliberations as the voice for the nonprofit sector, or at least tens of thousands of them, and now comes the Nonprofit Congress

Although the Congress "tagline" dutifully acknowledges the organizational diversity of the nonprofit sector, the consensus impulse is clear: Speak with one voice as the nonprofit sector.

Wish 'em luck, because the strength of the nonprofit sector speaking to its public and private, for-profit-sector counterparts is its diversity of opinion.

Think of the ranges of ideological opinions in the nonprofit sector, from some conservative groups trying to gut the estate tax or enact punitive immigration reform to some very liberal groups espousing the exact opposition.

The opinion continua make "one voice" a difficult objective.

The cacophony of the democratic process is daunting, but to drag society -- or the nonprofit sector -- down to a lowest common denominator of "one voice" may be a reaching a statement that says very little and ideally for some perhaps may be meant to.

From an organizational perspective, the Nonprofit Congress's target nonprofit population appears to be the smaller nonprofits whose voices might have been hard to discern amidst the high-priced spin of big foundations and behemoth nonprofits over-represented in the Independent Sector panel process.

That's not bad, though there's no guarantee that the membership of the various state associations will do much better in reaching the grassroots groups than Independent Sector did in attracting reportedly thousands of nonprofits to weigh in with opinions on the Nonprofit Panel's various recommendations to Sen. Grassley's Senate Finance Committee.

Although a few of the state convenings in preparation for the October 2006 Congress have been held, the emphasis is on nonprofits as nonprofits -- or, as the Congress website now proposes, an effort to find a substitute term of art in place of "nonprofit".

Much of the discussion to date has been around nonprofit needs and values -- more money for nonprofits; better money, such as long-term, core support; technical assistance; training; and of course the obligatory calls for better public understanding and reduced misconceptions of nonprofits.

Who's going to argue? Except that nonprofits are really only intermediaries, and it's easy for all

of us to forget it.

Nonprofits are intermediary mechanisms for government funders and charitable donors for the delivery of resources into the hands of families and communities whose needs merit response and know what is needed.

But what's needed isn't more money for nonprofits per se, or in an older National Council of Nonprofit Associations campaign, an extra percent of the federal budget into nonprofits, but a renewed federal funding and program commitment to address and solve the nation's social problems.

An extra dollop of a shrunken federal budget for nonprofits is hardly a campaign for the sector speaking with one voice.

Maybe some people think that shucking the term "nonprofit" and coming up with some nifty PR spin term, like "change-makers", will make more than one million diverse nonprofits into a potent force.

In reality, what's needed is a political mobilization not just of nonprofits – and we know how small the slice of nonprofits is that's doing hard-core organizing and advocacy -- but a mobilization of the people who look to, in theory sometimes control, and function as constituents of the nonprofit sector.

In Washington, a couple of hundred thousand people will protest the Congress's pathetic and sometimes destructive actions on immigration reform.

In the wake of the Abramoff scandal, Congress has generally wimped out on lobbying reform and congressional ethics.

Every day, there is a new article that reveals just how inadequately our nation continues to

respond to the needs of the hurricane ravaged Gulf Coast, not to mention the fact that scheduled elections will effectively disenfranchise thousands of New Orleans residents due to governmental incompetence at FEMA and above.

The challenge for nonprofits isn't to get a bigger cut of the incredible shrinking federal budget, much less set-asides for board training, but to reawaken and recapitalize the federal government to do what it is supposed to do.

The Congress would be pushing for nonprofits to lead the charge for social change and social justice, with an impatience that should be palpable and loud.

If this is really just a "rally 'round the nonprofit flag" convening or an effort to generate a different institutional home for nonprofits that don't see themselves as part of the Independent Sector Nonprofit Panel process, too bad.

If it isn't, it ought to be a convening not just for nonprofits, but for the voices of the people represented by nonprofits -- and for the all too many people who aren't represented or served -- calling on our society to push for social justice, not just more effective and better funded nonprofits.

Otherwise, the Nonprofit Congress will produce a lowest common denominator message in pabulum.

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