

5 Questions For... Gary Bass, Founder and Executive Director, OMB Watch

By Matt Sinclair

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*Founded in 1983 with the goal of lifting the veil of secrecy then shrouding the White House Office of Management and Budget, OMB Watch is a nonprofit research and advocacy organization that works to increase government transparency and accountability; ensure sound, equitable regulatory and budgetary processes and policies; and protect and promote active citizen participation in the affairs of the country. From 1999 to 2001, the organization, in partnership with researchers from Tufts University and the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest, helped administer the Strengthening Nonprofit Advocacy Project (SNAP), believed to be the first representative survey of how charities engage in advocacy activities. The results of the survey formed the basis for the report *Seen but not Heard: Strengthening Nonprofit Advocacy*, published in 2007 by the Aspen Institute. Recently, PND spoke with Bass about nonprofit advocacy and how philanthropic support of such advocacy is changing.*

Philanthropy News Digest: Atlantic Philanthropies recently released a report which argued that supporting advocacy makes sense for foundations. Historically, however, foundations have not been major funders of nonprofit advocacy. Is the environment for such support changing?

Gary Bass: First, let me just say the Atlantic Philanthropies report is excellent, and a number of groups around the country already are talking about how important it is for foundations to support advocacy. The report is particularly helpful in outlining ways that foundations can do that — that is, the types of activities that are included under the rubric of advocacy — as well as what foundations typically fund in this area. As I said, the report is remarkable and its impact has been immediate. I also think it's an indicator of how things have changed. Over the past decade or so, several foundations and support groups — including Northern California Grantmakers, the California Wellness Foundation, and the George Gund Foundation — have provided lots of information around advocacy, why it's important to support it, and how to do it. In terms of geography, national funders on both the East and West coasts appear to understand the importance of advocacy, while regional funders are doing a wonderful job within their issue areas — particularly the environment. Community foundations, in particular, have unique opportunities in this regard, in that they can lobby, fund others to lobby, and also convene grantees, constituents, and other stakeholders to explain why advocacy is important.

But the situation isn't all rosy. We're talking about a small number of foundations engaged in this kind of work, and the amount of money devoted to advocacy is miniscule in comparison to total philanthropic giving. I don't know of any data that does an adequate job of capturing how much is actually spent on advocacy, but I think everyone would agree that it's not a lot, and obviously more could be done. Whether an organization is working to reduce poverty, improve the quality of life in an under resourced community, or address an environmental problem, solving major societal problems requires bringing about social change, and that kind of change cannot be achieved without changes to public policy. To meet these kinds of goals, foundations need to use their grants strategically to support the kinds of advocacy needed to change policy at the local, state, and federal levels.

There's a wonderful line in the Atlantic Philanthropies report which notes that the Nature Conservancy is rightfully praised for protecting fifteen million acres of land over the past fifty years, while with a few strokes of his pen President Clinton protected more than sixty million acres. That's the kind of education funders need in order to better understand the strategic power of their grantmaking dollars.

Funders also need to understand that providing support for advocacy is broader than just offering support for lobbying. For example, research of public policy issues is critical. Enabling supporting organizations to engage in various regulatory activities — which is not lobbying and is completely appropriate and supportable by foundations — is essential. So is support for community organizing; small foundations like the Needmor Fund have been strong in that area. Voter engagement is another area where we've seen strong growth in philanthropic giving over the past decade.

PND: Changing public policy isn't something one does overnight. Are foundations changing their thinking about the duration of the grants they make in support of advocacy efforts?

GB: No, not really. We're not seeing an increase in general operating support, and we're not seeing consistent support for a particular grantee over a period of time. It's the rare funder who does either, much less both. That's a problem. I'm also concerned about the increased emphasis on using metrics to evaluate advocacy efforts. For example, OMB Watch helped generate a hundred and twenty thousand comments in opposition to the Environmental Protection Agency on a particular regulation. The EPA received very few comments in support of the regulation, yet the regulation was implemented. Is that an effective advocacy activity? I would argue it was. It established markers, it helped to build community, and it will lead to further action. In the example I just mentioned, twelve states ended up suing the EPA as a result of our campaign.

The key to advocacy is motivation. It's finding the right levers to help nonprofits see how advocacy relates to their mission. All the other issues about money, lobbying rules, and skills can be overcome through training. Addressing motivation is the heart of the matter, and it's no different for foundations. We have to find a way to motivate and help trustees and senior staff at foundations understand that advocacy is essential to fulfilling the mission of their grantees and their own foundations.

PND: The majority of the data used in *Seen but not Heard* was gathered during the SNAP (Strengthening Nonprofit Advocacy Project) study between 1999 and late 2001. In fact, I believe you were conducting meetings with focus groups on 9/11. The book was published in 2007, but the data is nearly a decade old now. Are you concerned that the environment for nonprofit advocacy may have changed significantly since the survey was conducted?

GB: While there has been no comprehensive assessment like our SNAP study since then, a couple of smaller studies have been done. [For example, there were two different surveys of D.C. nonprofits — one by Professor Linda Donaldson at Catholic University and a second by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy — and basically the data comes out almost identical to the SNAP data.](#) In addition, Lester Salomon at Johns Hopkins conducted a similar survey through his Listening Post Project, and while it may not have been a representative sample, it came out virtually identical with our SNAP data. So I don't think much has changed in regard to nonprofit advocacy. Maybe on the periphery, but at the heart of it I don't think 9/11 or other events have had any effect.

PND: Are people in the nonprofit sector still confused about what a nonprofit is legally permitted to do in terms of lobbying?

GB: No question, and that confusion occurs on many levels. In the broadest sense, leaders of nonprofits know they can advocate, but because they also have to deal with all of the usual operational challenges — fundraising, board development, personnel challenges, strategic planning — advocacy becomes the "extraordinary" thing to do. The area where you find the most confusion has to do with whether you can still lobby if you receive public-sector funds. Half of the nonprofits we surveyed did not know that if you receive government money, you can still engage in advocacy — you just have to make sure you're not using government funds to do that.

Another area of major confusion concerns nonpartisan voter engagement. This may stem from the IRS rules in this area being quite vague and applied depending on the "facts and circumstances." In my opinion, what we should be doing in our sector is trying to work with the IRS to establish a set of bright-line rules which eliminate, once and for all, this sort of ambiguity. Then we can focus more on motivating nonprofits to get involved in things like nonpartisan voter engagement.

PND: Will that be easier under a new administration? And what, if anything, should Congress and foundations do to facilitate the process?

GB: We need buy-in from both the executive and legislative branches. But it's not a purely partisan issue. There is plenty of antipathy among both Democrats and Republicans when it comes to nonprofit advocacy. Remember, nonprofits are far from monolithic in their ideological worldview; there's enormous diversity of perspective within the sector, which is one of the things that makes it strong. By the same token, the multiplicity of views you find in the sector does not endear us to any one party or group of legislators. Politicians love nonprofits on the one hand and fear their ability to highlight unpopular legislative positions on the other. So any regulatory effort — on voter engagement, for example — needs to start with either a President McCain or Obama encouraging nonprofits to get involved. I firmly believe that from his bully pulpit, the new president, whether it is McCain or Obama, should strongly encourage nonprofits to be involved in a broad range of advocacy activities.

I also think foundations have a crucial role to play in helping nonprofits express their voice and in creating a positive framework for change in America. You can't sustain the kind of change I'm talking about — big-vision change — with bake sales. It requires a commitment from large foundations to work together to build something bigger than what any one foundation can do alone.

Photo: Gary Bass, Founder and Executive Director, OMB Watch

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