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October 12, 2012



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The myth about 'special interests'

By MARK J. GOLDEN, FASAE, CAE | 10/11/2012



As we near the end of a political season that offers precious little from either campaign or the media covering them to elevate any sense of civic pride, it is perhaps ironic that a quintessentially Washington evening in celebration of "special interests" would be so uplifting.

The event was ASAE's 13th annual Summit Awards Dinner last week, which recognized six associations for specific acts of social responsibility, reminding us of how much good associations do.

Much of the public thinks associations do nothing but lobby the system to game advantage. That's certainly the attitude of the current administration, despite the U.S. government's own data, which shows associations spend many times more on educational activities than on lobbying. That's money invested in making American workers more capable and their jobs more secure, not to mention protecting consumers by improving the quality, reliability and safety of products and services.

The Summit Awards Dinner came just a few weeks after U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson dismissed a legal challenge of the Obama administration's ban on registered lobbyists serving on federal advisory boards. The judge's decision was predicated on her finding that serving on a federal advisory board is not a legal entitlement and that "the loss of the ability to feature [advisory board] service on a résumé does not come close to imposing the type of burden" that would justify overturning the ban.

As if the benefit of having association lobbyists with industry expertise on the panel goes entirely or even primarily in the direction of the association wishing to volunteer its human and intellectual resources!

Cutting off discourse between the executive branch and private sector diminishes regulators' performances by denying them access to the very expertise that will ensure regulation is meaningful and effective. Curtailing dialogue between regulators and the regulated results in public servants (well-intentioned and hard-working though they might be) writing regulations for a field in which they have no practical experience.

In my opinion, "special interest" is a pejorative term used by those who don't share that interest. No. We are, each of us, members of dozens of special interests, based on our jobs, the communities we live in, the needs of our families, our beliefs and our passions. When individuals with a shared interest come together to advance their own cause in a way that also serves society, it is a thing of beauty.

And it is good to have something like the Summit Awards Dinner to remind us of that.

Golden is the former executive director of the National Court Reporters Association and a past chairman of the ASAE Foundation. "Golden Commentary" is a monthly column he writes about current trends and news regarding the association community. Contact him at mjgolden@cox.net.

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