

cise “reinforced vigilance” in dealings in those countries. The list, while a move forward, was highly political. Britain refused to allow its notorious offshore dependencies—Guernsey, Jersey, the Isle of Man, the British Virgin Islands and Gibraltar—to be included. France’s protectorate Monaco also evaded the list.

Jean-François Thony, until last year program manager of the UN Global Program Against Money Laundering and now a French judge, said, “Britain said to France, ‘If you want to include the Channel Islands, we will ask Monaco to be put there as well.’ Now the French government is very tough on Monaco, but France has something to do with the fact that the situation has lasted for so long.” French banking authorities oversee Monaco. Antigua was excluded at the insistence of Canada, which represents it on the board of directors of the IMF. Thony added, “There’s a lot of hypocrisy, pointing the finger at those countries which are supposed not to comply with international rules when the banks really operating them are the

major banks of our countries. That is the heart of the problem.”

Following publication of the task force list, a host of countries announced they would adopt laws or regulations to combat money laundering. Winer, the Clinton Administration official, said it would take several years to judge how genuine the reforms were.

In the wake of O’Neill’s recent comments, some tax havens pulled back from negotiating with the OECD, confident that the Americans will keep offshore safe for tax evaders and other crooks. Meanwhile, even among groups concerned about drug crime, the ills of globalization and wealth disparities, there is little pressure for reform. While the Europeans can be expected to continue their modest efforts, not much will change unless the United States decides to participate. Until then, international banks will continue to make it easy for dictators to loot their countries and the rich to evade taxes, while ordinary citizens underwrite ever more of the cost of government. ■

AN ACTIVIST THINK TANK IS FIGHTING THE RIGHT AT THE BALLOT BOX—AND WINNING.

Taking (Back) the Initiative

DAVID SARASOHN



This is the latest installment in our “What Works” series, which explores effective strategies for improving people’s lives through progressive social change.

—The Editors



TIM LANE

The Economic Opportunity Institute sounds like a typical think tank—of any political persuasion. Each of the name’s three interchangeable words evokes Dupont Circle, position papers and regression analysis.

But the institute, from the small building it shares with an architect a few blocks from the University of Washington—about as far from the other Washington as you can get without the Pacific lapping over your fax machines—sees itself differently.

Progressive policy institutes, explains the group’s statement of philosophy, come in three flavors. There’s “think-tank hands-off research,” as in universities. There’s “more populist analyses that are picked up by local and national media”—still not quite the institute’s style. The third category, in which policy development meets real-world advocacy, “is the niche that we want to exploit,” says EOI. “Our job is to develop populist majoritarian policy and push that policy forward into the public eye.” In other words: less think, more tank.

Because of that attitude, Washington is now the first state in the country with a minimum wage adjusted for inflation. From another EOI innovation, the state has a program to develop a childcare career ladder, to provide some professional respect

and better pay for a generally minimum-wage work force that has major responsibilities and huge turnover and gets treated like a Play-Doh proletariat.

A bill EOI supported in the 2000 state legislative session that would use surpluses in the unemployment fund to create a paid-family-leave program—standard in Europe, unimaginable in the United States—made it through a State Senate committee, then died. Now, EOI’s founder and executive director, John Burbank, is working on the idea with Washington’s US Senator Patty Murray, who is interested in proposing it as a federal pilot program.

And this spring, the institute announced that it would push its second statewide ballot initiative, this one allying with Washington health providers for a measure that would add a 60-cent tax to a pack of cigarettes, using the proceeds for healthcare for 50,000 working-poor Washingtonians. EOI developed the measure, did preliminary polling and helped assemble the coalition. In the campaign this fall, the institute will run statewide media tours, meet with editorial boards and reporters, develop one-page issue blurbs on different parts of the measure and boldly go to places where progressive activists have rarely gone before—like talk radio.

Over many years as a community organizer, Democratic staff member, political director of the Washington State Labor Council and graduate student, John Burbank concluded that progressive forces weren’t just losing the struggle, they weren’t fighting the right one. While progressives talked social theory, the right turned to the ballot box and the airwaves. And it was winning.

“The right has understood the power of the initiative, shaping

David Sarasohn is associate editor of The Oregonian in Portland.

debate, forcing debate onto their part of the field,” says Burbank, sitting in one of Seattle’s many espresso shops, as central to the local culture as Microsoft. “Some people say they’re an abominable way to make law, but [initiatives] are there, and if you dismiss them, you’re turning them over to the right wing.” In Washington—as in many other states—there are well-funded, well-connected conservative advocacy institutes eager to seize any opportunity to set the terms of discussion.

The Economic Opportunity Institute—starting out three years ago in a few cubicles in what the *Seattle Times* calls the “funky, ultraliberal Fremont neighborhood”—wasn’t born on the barricades, or out of a single inspired and overstuffed checkbook. It came out of Burbank’s 1997 master’s thesis at the University of Washington’s school of public administration (several of his fellow students would later become EOI staff members). His thesis designed—in precise detail, including a budget and proposed board—an Economic Security Institute to take on Washington State’s four conservative think tanks. Burbank also intended to challenge forces on the progressive side, which he saw as focusing too heavily on foreign policy and social issues, losing some of the bread-and-butter focus that appealed to both poorer and middle-class voters.

That’s why EOI—which works on the slogan “New Tools for Building the Middle Class”—likes to focus on gritty, practical issues like healthcare for the working poor and childcare development. It also works to present the issues in a media-savvy way that appeals to middle-class voters: For example, treat-

ing quality child-care not as a question of equity, but as a way to promote parental employment.

“Work has an enormous resonance with the middle class,” Burbank says. “One of the sieves that we put issue development through is, ‘Can it distribute benefits up and down the income ladder?’ Some issues may disproportionately benefit lower-income people but resonate with middle-income people.”

EOI’s childcare campaign is a case in point. Not only did the institute’s efforts lead Washington Governor Gary Locke to set up the childcare career ladder, but when a fiscal crunch threatened the program during the current legislative session, EOI’s positioning as a public advocacy force helped produce 1,200 personal messages to the governor’s office. Partly as a result, Burbank expects Locke to back not just maintaining but expanding the program.


And Burbank’s playing with another idea: a city initiative in Seattle to raise \$10 million a year for childcare with a tax on espresso drinks. This is a little like taxing wine in Bordeaux, and he remarks musingly, “Everybody laughs at that.” But it could solidify local childcare funding and quality, would have to carry only the solidly liberal Seattle electorate and with success might spread to other cities. At least, Burbank argues, the effort would “build a database and catalyze discussion.”

Burbank, a thin, intense man who tends to explain things at loving length, argues that some activists insist on portraying themselves as advocates for the poor, which leads to a double trap: They can’t draw enough mainstream, middle-class support to win anything, and they “tend to isolate the lower-income constituency.”

To some of those advocates, EOI’s strategies seem indirect—

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and insufficiently relevant. "While I appreciate the work that they do, most of it doesn't really help the work that we do," says Jean Colman, director of the Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition in Seattle. "If the institute would help us do linking with middle-income folks to explain why there's a safety net and why it helps everybody, that would be a wonderful thing for them to do. I haven't seen them do that."

Still, EOI seeks to represent the interests of a diverse set of players in progressive politics. The board of EOI—in the move from thesis to practice, "Security" was replaced by "Opportunity"—reflects both Burbank's philosophy and his strategy. It includes union representatives, academics, a pollster and state legislators (including one who has since become co-speaker of the State House). A policy adviser to Governor Locke is a former board president, and still a member. They're not the figures swimming in the standard think tank; they show why Burbank prefers the term "activist public policy institute."

To Kim Cook, an EOI board member and regional director of the Service Employees International Union, the institute reflects the kind of approach—and alliance—needed to challenge an atmosphere that's proving toxic to progressive ideas. "There's been a lot of talk on the board about broadening the public debate and [changing] the antitax attitude," says Cook. The goal is "to bring more progressive initiatives to the electorate."

EOI's successful minimum-wage campaign, launched in early 1998 as the institute was just getting off the ground, confirmed Burbank's feeling that the initiative could be an effective liberal tool. The vote gave the state not just a minimum wage among the nation's highest, but the only one in the country indexed to inflation to rise automatically. Running initiatives, admits Spokane Democratic State Senator Lisa Brown, another EOI board member and an economics professor at Eastern Washington University, "can be risky. If you run a progressive initiative and lose, it can set you back. But with the chances of something happening legislatively so low, you work on other ways."

This is, of course, what the original progressives realized at the beginning of the past century when they created the initiative, and what right-wingers understood at the end of it when they seized on the tactic. Burbank wants liberals to reclaim the initiative at the start of the new one. To him, the initiative is not only a tool but an opportunity. A campaign to collect the 225,000 signatures to put something on the state ballot, he notes, is a chance for "building a terrific database from signatures and donors." Which, at least potentially, can help in building a real grassroots movement.

To compete at the ballot box, progressive activists need tight connections to the sympathetic institutions on their side. "The right-wing institutes are powerful not just in how they define the terms of the debate, but how they're linked to their financial power," Brown points out. Practically, that means progressives need unions in the room. And, as Brown's prominence on the board suggests, it means reaching around the state, expanding progressive efforts beyond their permanent bridgehead in Seattle and Puget Sound.

From the outset, EOI has focused on the role and use of media, of making connections in a world of quick-hit consciousness. "We can pursue all the policy development we want, but if we correspond only with the policy elites, we have failed in our

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mission," explains an early "Tool Kit" for the group. "We must develop and implement a comprehensive media plan that brings our policy issues to the public and engages them."

It's a matter of both whom the institute wants to reach, and whom it wants to help. The poor, and people who have dropped out, aren't "easily organizable politically, but they do listen to and are influenced by the media," argues Burbank. "To me that's very important stuff, talk-radio. We shouldn't shy away from it."

So Burbank, as part of the media theme that he calls "organically part of what we do," goes on any talk-radio show that will have him, even if that means talking to lots of people complaining that Hillary Clinton keeps breaking into their houses to steal their guns. The goal is to battle on every front—including the ones that progressives have generally evacuated. And the group, in listing its accomplishments, lists its press clippings along with its policy advances.

Increasingly, the EOI is in a position to move on multiple issues at once. Its staff, which started with Burbank and a press aide, is now up to ten and growing. Its budget is rising, with 80 percent of its funding coming from foundations.

And the foundations are encouraged. "One of the exciting things about EOI," says Michael Caudell-Feagan, a board member of the Stern Family Fund, "is that it's trying to change the terms of the debate with proposals that have broad appeal but deal with

economic justice." Around the country, the foundation has been trying to seed similar institutes, such as the Center for Economic Justice in Texas, Good Jobs First in Washington, DC, and the Oregon Center for Public Policy. Caudell-Feagan thinks EOI is setting out a direction and a pattern that liberals haven't been following, but which is gaining ground politically. "Slowly but surely," he says, "a number of foundations have begun to encourage groups that deal with bread-and-butter issues."

In dealing with those issues—and in focusing on media strategies, broad alliances and the initiative process—EOI has begun to turn around a battle progressives have been losing. "They seem to be doing a better job than anyone I can think of in our region, in a way that seems to have legs, at building a program for economic security for working-class and middle-class people," says Jeff Malachowsky, founder of the Portland, Oregon-based Western States Center.

Burbank's approach may be more mundane than some progressive strategies, and his vision of the middle class as the new liberal constituency—and the media as the new barricades—may lack a certain work-shirt romance. But he insists, and he's beginning to pile up some evidence, that on issues such as minimum-wage increases, healthcare coverage and childcare subsidies, progressives can build successes and alliances. The first step is to retake the initiative—the one on the ballot. ■

EXCHANGE

C O N T I N U E D

(Continued From Page 2)

the group of US relatives suing Libya for some \$4 billion as responsible for the bombing has every reason to dislike any questioning of the verdict.

Hans Koechler is indeed a distinguished Austrian philosopher who by now probably knows a lot more about Scottish law than the Cohens. Those sitting through the entire trial in Zeist, Holland (which the Cohens, contrary to their misleading insinuation, attended a relatively sparse number of times), recall that Koechler was present for almost the entire proceedings. Thus Koechler may know, as the Cohens do not, that while Scottish judges cannot introduce evidence, they can rule on what evidence is or is not admitted.

Less prejudiced critics might pause to reflect that, since they had brought the indictments, there obviously was a conspiracy by the US and British governments to convict the Libyans. Collusion in such an agreement by the judges and the defense, William Taylor QC (counsel for Megrabi), can only be inferred, but it is not absurd for Koechler to make that inference. The judges found Megrabi guilty solely on the basis of some very shaky circumstantial evidence, and the normally tigerish Taylor, in the opinion of many legal observers, put up an astonishingly feeble performance in his crucial cross-examination of Tony Gauci, the only witness who could link Megrabi to the suitcase bomb. Nevertheless, Gauci was hardly "an excellent witness." Engelhardt has no basis in claiming only six meetings between police and Gauci,

who was interviewed by innumerable Scottish, US and Maltese law enforcement groups, as well as prosecution and defense lawyers. On a reasonable count, the number of such interviews goes well into the double digits. The judges themselves admitted in their verdict, "On the matter of identification of the first accused, there are undoubtedly problems," and "We accept of course that he never made what could be described as an absolutely positive identification."

In fact, when Gauci gave evidence on July 11 last year, he was asked several times by the crown counsel if he could identify anyone in the court as the man who had bought the clothes from his shop that were later found in the suitcase containing the bomb. He failed to do so, and only when asked if the person sitting next to the policeman in the dock was the man in question did he grudgingly reply: "He resembles him a lot." On an earlier occasion, when shown a photograph of Mohammed Abu Talb, a Palestinian terrorist whom the defense contended was the real bomber, Gauci used almost the same words, declaring, according to his brother, that Talb "resembles" the clothes buyer "a lot." Gauci's identification of Megrabi at the identity parade just before the opening of the trial was with the words "not exactly the man I saw in the shop. Ten years ago I saw him, but the man who look [*sic*] a little bit like is the number 5" (Megrabi).

It is highly likely that the evidence of identification of Megrabi, its unsatisfactory nature and the comments by the trial judges will bulk large in the appeal this coming fall. However Gauci's testimony may have later appeared in a

transcript or on a video recording, two relatives who were physically present at the courtroom testimony have confided that they found Gauci far from confident in his identification.

Whether Megrabi had a false passport, or stayed in Maltese hotels, or was there on December 20–21, 1988, is irrelevant—grassy knoll territory, if you will. Is there evidence that links him to the bomb? That's the sole pertinent issue. That's why Gauci's testimony is crucial. As I noted above, even the judges admitted that identification was squishy. As for Fhimah, the judges would doubtless have preferred to opt for a "not proven" verdict, but there was no evidence of any sort against him, apart from testimony of the prosecution's supergrass Giaka, who was on the CIA's payroll before, during and after the bombing, but who failed to mention the alleged role of Megrabi and Fhimah in the bombing to his paymasters until 1991. Even the judges called him a liar. The prosecution described Fhimah in indictments and thereafter, up until almost the end of the trial, as a Libyan intelligence agent, then dropped the accusation.

As far as the baggage is concerned, the prosecution's sole achievement was to demonstrate that it was theoretically possible for a bag from the Air Malta flight to have found its way onto the Pan Am flight from Frankfurt to London that connected to Flight 103. The fact remains that there is no conclusive evidence that this transfer occurred. When Granada TV broadcast a documentary asserting such a transfer as a fact, Air Malta sued and extracted damages.

ALEXANDER COCKBURN

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