



# THINKING & DOING

NATIONWIDE CITIZEN GROUPS  
PUSH FOR POLITICAL PRAGMATISM

James Tobin

## **ABOUT THIS REPORT AND ITS AUTHOR**

A statewide group of bipartisan business and political leaders formed the Center for Michigan in early 2006 to assist our state through its current period of wrenching economic trouble and create informed hope for a better future Michigan.

To do so, the Center:

- 1) Engages thousands of statewide residents in large- and small-group dialogues to intensify citizen understanding of Michigan's current challenges and amplify the public's voice in public policy.
- 2) Advocates pragmatic, bipartisan solutions to big-picture policy challenges, including creating a globally competitive workforce, diversifying the state economy, instituting a clear, strategic state budget policy, and instituting reforms to improve the efficiency of government operations and improve the accountability of the political system.

As we embarked on this work, the Center steadily picked up anecdotal evidence of other groups engaged in similar efforts across the country. So we engaged the help of Geoff Young, a graduate student at the Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan, to plumb the depths of bipartisan, citizen engagement across the country. Using public documents, database searches, and interviews, Mr. Young explored dozens of non-profit groups and think tanks and found many examples of citizens and community leaders moving beyond traditional two-party politics to address crucial public issues.

Building on Geoff's initial work, award-winning author James Tobin then studied several such "think-and-do tanks" in-depth to produce this report.

Mr. Tobin is the author of numerous books, including Ernie Pyle's War: America's Eyewitness to World War II (winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award) and To Conquer the Air: The Wright Brothers and the Great Race for Flight. A historian and associate professor of journalism at Miami University, Ohio, Mr. Tobin has been awarded a 2008 fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities to pursue research about Franklin D. Roosevelt and the experience of disability.

Mr. Tobin found that the think-and-do tanks profiled herein work in very different parts of the country yet share very similar and deep concerns about the governance systems in those regions. Those shared concerns include the notions that:

- Single-interest groups wield far too much influence over parties and office-holders.
- Effective governance is crippled by the endless chase for campaign cash.
- Term limits threaten to turn compromise into a long lost political art.
- Gerrymandered legislative districts push out moderates and solidify the power of hardened, partisan caucuses.

"The public sees the system as badly broken, so public engagement in civic life declines," Tobin concludes. "So voting declines and fewer capable people run for office – which accelerates the downward spiral of governance-as-usual, which in turn erodes public confidence further."

Think-and-do tanks are working to reverse that grim feedback loop. They represent a new and promising way to bring public will and common sense back to our democratic institutions.

Sincerely,

John Bebow  
Executive Director  
The Center for Michigan  
July 2008

The Center for Michigan is part of an emerging middle way in American politics—a state-by-state constellation of pragmatic “think-and-do tanks” seeking to break stalemates created by polarized parties and government by selfish interests.

At least a dozen such organizations have sprung up since 1990. They are nonpartisan. They sidestep the ideological warfare waged by the more numerous think tanks of the right and left. Most sponsor research by public-policy experts—that’s the “think” part of their work. But they also promote pragmatic, fact-based problem-solving in the public arena—that’s the “do” part. Some, including the Center for Michigan, are trying new techniques for mobilizing grass-roots opinion known as “public engagement” or “deliberative democracy.”

Their issues constitute a kind of home-grown nation-building—high-quality economic development, strong investments in education and infrastructure, wise use of natural resources, and good-government reforms aimed at restoring public confidence in the democratic system.

And their historical moment appears to be arriving. Strong polling evidence suggests that a rising number of American voters are ready for the sort of centrist problem-solving that is typical of these think-and-do tanks.

While partisans have been firing at each other from increasingly distant armed camps, voters have been gathering in the middle. From 1952 to 1964, only 25 percent of Americans defined themselves as political independents. But since the early 1990s, independents have reached nearly 40 percent—a sea change in political identification. According to the Center for the Study of the American Electorate at American University, nearly every state requiring party registration is now registering independents at faster rates than either Democrats or Republicans.

In Michigan, the trend is even more striking. According to an early 2008 poll conducted for the Center for Michigan by Michigan State University, state residents desperately desire bipartisan cooperation and problem-solving from lawmakers in the state Capitol. But a majority sees little evidence that Democrats and Republicans are working together in Lansing to find solutions to Michigan’s problems.

When asked to rate the importance of inter-party cooperation on a scale of one to 10, with 10 being “very important,” more than 80 percent of respondents put their rating at eight or higher—and they blamed both parties roughly equally for partisan gridlock.

In state after state and on the national scene, many believe politicians of all stripes are failing not only to solve but even to grapple with the basic challenges of public life. There is “a growing sense among the vast, centrist, pragmatic majority of Americans that Washington’s ideologically driven ‘politics of polarization’ is increasingly leaving them out,” the political scientists Daniel Yankelovich and Norton Garfunkle wrote recently. As early as 1991, the journalist-turned-scholar E.J. Dionne observed in his influential book, *Why Americans Hate Politics*, that “on issue after issue, there is consensus on where the country should move or at least on what we should be arguing about,” yet “liberalism and conservatism make it impossible for that consensus to express itself.” And Dionne was writing before the polarizing effects of the Clinton-Gingrich years and the hard-right administration of George W. Bush.

What independents want most, observers say, is simply a civil discussion about what to do.

“The public is ahead of the politicians on this,” said Matthew Dowd, a political consultant who was chief strategist for President George W. Bush’s 2004 reelection campaign but broke with Bush during his second term. “They want to be able to have a discussion that’s not visceral, not hate-filled—just like the conversations that they have with their neighbors. The public is just tired of worn-out accusations. I sometimes say it’s like a dodge ball game. Everybody’s afraid to run to the middle because they’re afraid they’ll get pelted. But that’s where the public is.”

To get governing systems back on track, the Center for Michigan and other think-and-do tanks are sponsoring broad-based, technologically sophisticated campaigns to bring ordinary citizens back into

public life. In these efforts, ordinary citizens are recruited in large numbers to learn about policy options and express their preferences—all with an eye toward showing elected lawmakers what the broad middle of the American electorate actually wants.

“If we are one of the oldest surviving democracies in the world, we’ve got to figure out how to make democracy work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” said Sterling Speirn, president of the Kellogg Foundation, a sponsor of “Michigan’s Defining Moment,” the Center for Michigan’s public-engagement campaign. “The gridlock and the stalemate are pretty discouraging. So how do you get elected officials to listen? One of the hypotheses is that leaders could lead better if they got clearer signals from their constituents that got past the static of the vested interests on either side of an issue.”

Leaders of the new, nonpartisan think-and-do tanks say they fill the void between polarized parties and clashing interest groups.

“In a properly organized world, we shouldn’t exist,” said Joel Rogers, director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), one of the earliest and most accomplished of the state-based think-and-do tanks. “I’d much rather have a competent federal government and a competent state government than for us to have to point out and do the stuff they’re not doing. Yeah, if we had accountable parties; if we had a competent, modernized labor movement; if we had an organized business community that wasn’t so ideological—sure, all sorts of things could happen.

“It’s just that there’s been a generation or more of demonization of government and divestment of states and local governments. A lot of the obvious things that need to be done just haven’t been done in the last 30 years. So it’s not surprising that you get these new sorts of organizations.”

The think-and-do-tanks argue that:

Single-interest groups and corporations wield far too much influence over parties and office-holders, thanks in part to skyrocketing campaign costs;  
Effective governing is crippled by the nearly endless need to raise funds and wage campaigns;

Term limits have increased the power of lobbyists, who dominate the policy-making process by the sheer weight of their experience and control of information. Short-term legislators barely get time to know each other, let alone learn the ropes of lawmaking and compromise;

Gerrymandered legislative districts push moderates out of politics. As Pete Peterson, executive director of Common Sense California, put it: “You have to run to the right of a Republican to get elected in a Republican district, and you have to run to the left of a Democrat to get elected in a Democratic district.

What that does is dump a bunch of hardened Republicans and Democrats into Sacramento—and now you’re going to try to get something done.”

All these ills make it nearly impossible for lawmakers to address critical long-term challenges in budgeting, infrastructure, education, environment, health care and immigration.

These problems fuel a grim feedback loop: The public sees the system as badly broken, so public engagement in civic life declines; so voting declines and fewer capable people run for office—which accelerates the downward spiral of governance-as-usual, which in turn erodes public confidence further.

But alienation and apathy have not been the only responses to this crisis of democratic dysfunction. Ordinary citizens, maverick leaders, and innovative activists have tried to find new ways to leverage the political system on behalf of centrist pragmatic reforms. These include the campaigns of such political mavericks Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996; Governor Jesse Ventura of Minnesota; and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California. Avowedly moderate action groups and caucuses have sprung up in both parties—the Democratic Leadership Council, which spurred the “New Democrat” candidacy of Bill Clinton; the Republican Main Street Partnership, an association of some 42 U.S. representatives and six

senators (plus Governor Schwarzenegger) who espouse “a centrist, pragmatic Republican agenda” emphasizing “inclusion, respect, reason and compassion,” and the 48 “Blue Dog Democrats” in the U.S. House of Representatives.

At the state level, legislators calling themselves Florida Mainstream Democrats have declared they are not “a bunch of wild-eyed liberals,” while in Texas, a new political action committee called Texas 20/20 raises money for nine legislators, all of them elected as conservative Democrats, who say they “operate in the interests of their constituents—not partisan ideologies.”

On the Internet, grass-roots commentators carry on lively debates on websites and blogs whose names convey their centrist approach to issues: ReunitingAmerica.org; CentristCoalition.com; TheBigTent.net; ModerateVoters.org. In intellectual circles, too, there are movements to revitalize what the late historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., long ago called “the Vital Center.” Perhaps most notably, the influential sociologist Amitai Etzioni and others have argued that the simple, playground notion of fairness may provide a unifying principle to counter ideological stalemate; indeed, Etzioni commissioned a Gallup Poll in 2004 that showed large majorities embracing proposals expressed in terms of basic fairness rather than “morality,” “rights” or “equality.”

The most innovative attempts to revitalize the policy process go by the names “public engagement,” “civic engagement” and “deliberative democracy.” These are well-organized efforts to convene large and diverse groups of citizens in actual or online “town halls.” In these forums, people learn and deliberate, then express opinions and develop positions on critical issues facing cities, regions and states. The best known of these organizations is AmericaSpeaks, a nonprofit that has run giant “21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meetings” in some 31 states. The organization uses small-group discussion, keypad polling, and groupware computing to help people develop well-informed preferences on public questions—preferences that are then communicated to lawmakers and public officials with the weight of substantial numbers behind them. In 2002, for example, some 4,000 New Yorkers took part in an AmericaSpeaks event to consider options for redeveloping the World Trade Center site. Other such meetings have been held in Louisiana to weigh in on plans for redeveloping New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

All these things—the spikes in popularity for maverick politicians, the centrist caucuses and commentators, the thousands who turn out for “public engagement” events—are signs of a deep yearning for a revitalized democracy and of a broad constituency for pragmatic solutions to pressing problems. Assessing the off-year elections in 2006, in which nearly 50 percent of exit-poll voters identified themselves as “moderate,” *New York Times* columnist David Brooks called that constituency “the muscular middle,” a group he said would jump at the chance to vote for “open-minded, unassuming centrists who are interested in government more than politics.”

The state-based think-and-do tanks partake of that energy in the center of American politics. They aren’t trying to kick-start new parties or develop new ideologies. They might best be imagined as small commando units moving back and forth across partisan lines, trying to bring warring parties to the peace table, point out common ground, defuse tensions, broker compromise, promote reforms, and encourage concrete and workable solutions to specific problems.

Some claim the new organizations are not only nonpartisan but non-ideological. But that’s off the mark, said Elisabeth Gerber, professor of public policy at the University of Michigan and an advisor to the Center for Michigan.

“Preserving our state’s resources, investing in education, growing the knowledge economy, reforming and rationalizing government—all that is focused on the broad center,” she said. “But it’s not neutral. It’s not non-ideological. That *is* an ideology. Those are policies whose primary benefits go to the middle and upper middle class. They’re not tax breaks for the super-rich, and they’re not increased programmatic benefits for the really poor. It’s government for the broad center.”

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The aim of governing to sustain and broaden the ranks of the middle class echoes the original progressive reformers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—the movement that spawned both Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, bitter rivals who nonetheless shared a belief that government should promote the public interest, broadly defined. It was progressives of both parties, equally in thrall to the emerging notion that government should be guided by scientific, rational expertise, who founded the first think tanks—the Russell Sage Foundation (1907), the Bureau of Municipal Research (1907) and the Brookings Institution (1916). In these elite cloisters of expertise, highly educated researchers and analysts worked in scholarly anonymity, compiling data, applying sober analysis, then publishing the results in dense reports. Others followed, but only slowly; by 1970 there were still fewer than 50 think tanks in the United States.

Then came the great think-tank boom, and with it a change in strategy. The old model of above-the-fray expertise faded. Increasingly, the think tanks sent their analysts into the public arena to advocate and argue. Theorists of the modern conservative movement founded or expanded think tanks to do battle with the welfare state; liberal thinkers responded with their own array of organizations. Competition for attention and influence soared, resulting, as the journalist Patricia Linden wrote in 1987, in “an endless forest of communiqués, reports, journals, newsletters, op-ed articles, press releases, books and educational materials.”<sup>1</sup> And that was before the Internet and cable television vastly expanded the field of battle.

By 2000, U.S. think tanks numbered some 300. Nearly all of them, to one degree or another, now faced a central paradox.

To have any significant influence, most think tanks have no choice but to venture into the public arena and argue for some sort of position—from a broad belief that a particular social problem merits more attention, to pointed advocacy of a specific bill in Congress or a state legislature. In a sense, nearly every think tank is now a think-and-do tank. Mary Jo Waites, director of the Washington-based Pew Center for the States, summed up the simple reality that has driven them into the public sphere: “Any traditional, put-out-academic-research-papers think tank just doesn’t get anywhere any more.”

Yet the din of competing experts has undermined Americans’ confidence in the very idea of expertise—and thus has undermined the think tanks’ credibility even as their volume and visibility have increased. As the Brookings economist Henry Aaron put it: “On any given subject...the lay reader is routinely confronted with experts saying conflicting things. And therefore, the reader is at a loss. And it tends to undercut the capacity of any of the studies to have a major influence on policy. People wield their social science research studies like short swords and shields in the ideological wars.”<sup>2</sup>

This is the central challenge that state-based think-and-do tanks must overcome—how to wield influence for good government and wise policies without losing their audience and their credibility.

Andrew Rich, a political scientist at the City University of New York who has studied think tanks across the U.S., said there can be no retreat to the old model of “neutral” expertise. Think tanks, he said, will inevitably enter battles over the controversial issues of the day.

“The bigger issue is to figure out among what groups you want to be credible,” Rich said. “There’s no point in being credible just for the sake of being credible. I’ve run into so many nonpartisan groups that do that. They say, ‘Well, we have to have such a strong reputation.’ Well, it’s easy to have a strong reputation if you’re not really doing anything. You have to be willing to play off a little bit of your credibility in order to advance an argument.”

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 82.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy and the Politics of Expertise* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 215.

Yet that doesn't mean sacrificing honesty, he said. In fact, effective advocacy that builds consensus is impossible without it. The point is to do solid research, then publicize results and point to solutions with persuasive communications that connect with the public and the policy-makers.

"You want to do rigorous work," Rich said. "You want it to hold up to the norms of good social science research. But then—it's a very simple point: Produce products that are brief, that are easily digestible, that are timed well. Those things don't have to be in tension with producing good work. My experience and my research is that consumers of this work can draw that distinction. They know good work from bad."

This report offers profiles of six state-based organizations that are meeting this challenge—maintaining credibility while effecting positive change—in distinct ways. Each is a success story. Yet together they show there is no single formula for success in the field. Each has adapted to its own special circumstances, and to the social and political culture of its own state, with a custom-made combination of research and advocacy. Some have been operating for more than a decade. Others are just getting started. Some are big, some small. Each offers an example of a winning strategy.

**Aim for the Common Good**  
**Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth**

*Founded: 1996*

*Annual budget: \$2.3 million*

*Recent funders: Many, including AARP-Massachusetts, Bank of America, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, Boston Foundation, Schott Foundation for Public Education*

The roots of the Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth—MassINC—lie in the state’s Democratic party. But its *raison d’etre* was quite different from the Democrats’ traditional identity as champions of the downtrodden.

“We were founded to be a nonpartisan public-policy research organization focused on the growth and vitality of the middle class,” says John Schneider, MassINC’s executive vice-president. “That was a radical idea. We weren’t going to advocate on behalf of the poor, or to advance progressive causes. We were founded as a response to the rising partisanship in the political process.”

The key figure was Tripp Jones, a former aide to Michael Dukakis who, in 1994, ran the gubernatorial campaign of the Democrat Mark Roosevelt (Teddy’s great-grandson) against the popular Republican incumbent, William Weld. After Weld trounced Roosevelt, Tripp came away “frustrated and disgusted with the interest-group politics of the Democratic Party,” Schneider recalls. Jones believed a new organization was needed, one that would explore the state’s problems more objectively and with the aim of serving the common good, not just the interests of the Democratic coalition.

MassINC’s main aim for the first few years was to push big, long-term issues to the top of the state’s agenda, especially workforce training for a changing economy and demographic change. Through an adroit media strategy—including the publication of its own magazine, *Commonwealth*—and public engagement, MassINC succeeded in gaining far greater visibility for those issues. In the process, it became a major player on the state scene, winning praise from the Republican governor, Mitt Romney, for a “nonpartisan approach to public policy that offers citizens the ability to analyze issues on the merits—no filter, no spin, just the facts.”

The group began to encounter a problem born of success, Schneider says. They had to ask: What next? Should we go beyond research and agenda-setting? Should we fight the battle for specific solutions?

Some MassINC board members wanted to do just that. Others feared that aggressive advocacy would turn people off. So, as an aid to deciding how far to go on any given project, MassINC staffers broke down exactly what think tanks do—or might do. It was a simple idea they called the “impact sequence.”

It says that each project has five potential steps: 1) research; 2) education/outreach to help the public understand the problem; 3) building a consensus about the best solution; 4) mobilizing forces to work for a specific solution; 5) joining the battle in the legislative or policy arena. With each project, MassINC now considers how far along the sequence to go. “Our strength as an organization is that people pay attention to what we say precisely because we have a certain nonpartisan status,” Schneider says. “So we’re very selective about pushing an opinion. I’m not saying we don’t do it. But [we ask]: is this the right thing we want to be pushing an opinion on?” They won’t push for a specific policy response unless their research clearly points to such a plan. They’re very careful about calling for any new public spending, Schneider says. They’re much more likely to push incentives for private investment, and to urge individuals to take responsibility for change. These considerations are part of MassINC’s search for what might be called post-polarization politics, a pragmatic approach that seeks the broadest possible definition of the common good in a changing society.

“The deal we had between workers and families and industries and communities is all being renegotiated,” Schneider says. “My dad worked for General Electric for a 30-year career. That’s not my life. How are we renegotiating the social contract so that I know what the new rules of engagement are? What role does

public policy have? What role do institutions have? Who pays for health care? How do you save for retirement? How do you get education and skills? How do you get good government?

“These are profound questions that states are facing. Our role and responsibility is to force this discussion in Massachusetts. Washington is just so damn polarized that I think we have an obligation to lead the way on these discussions.”

**Point to Shared Interests**  
**The Center on Wisconsin Strategy**

*Founded: 1995*

*Annual budget: \$1.2 million*

*Recent funders: Brittingham, Annie E. Casey, Nathan Cummings, Evjue, Ford, Joyce, Rockefeller, and Russell Sage Foundations*

The state-based think-and-do tanks often confront a certain problem of perception, especially when they try to build bridges across partisan no-man's-land. The perception is that anyone in a public-policy think tank must be a liberal...or that anyone willing to work with business leaders can't have labor's interests at heart...or that any public-policy expert affiliated with a university must be an elitist.

Joel Rogers, founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), is a self-identified “vaguely left” professor of political science, law and sociology who enjoys good relations with a string of major corporations. So on any given day he can face any or all of those perception problems, depending on who's in the room. He deals with them by standing his ground and patiently pointing out that traditional antagonists in the public arena often should seek the same things.

“You haven't lived,” Rogers says, “until you've presided over a meeting where you've got business people who hate unions with unions who hate almost everybody with community groups that feel screwed by both business and the unions with environmental groups who hate the unions for not paying enough attention to the environment – and then watching them all come together in happy, sudden concert to realize that, in fact, they all have common interests.”

Going only by his resume, you'd say they don't come any more ivory-tower-elite than Rogers. He has a Ph.D. from Princeton and a law degree from Yale, and he was awarded a MacArthur Foundation “genius” fellowship. But he and COWS stand squarely in the tradition of the century-old “Wisconsin Idea,” which says the University of Wisconsin—of which COWS is technically a part, though it's funded from outside—should engage in work far beyond its walls. The idea is to establish field laboratories for democracy, all with the aim of improving the lives of all citizens in the state, no matter what their income bracket, minority status, level of education, or sector of the labor market.

One project, in particular, highlights COWS's success in getting people to work together despite all those brackets and boundaries.

Much of COWS' work is in the area of “high-road” economic development—a term COWS originated and helped to spread. Rogers explained the idea this way: “It says: ‘Look, you can earn money in one of two ways. One is that you can treat people like road-kill and the earth like a sewer and just compete on reducing your costs. The other is you can compete more directly on quality and value, within price constraints, by producing distinctive and highly operational goods.’”

When COWS was founded in the early 1990s, Milwaukee County had lost a third of its manufacturing base in 10 years. If more jobs were not to be lost, factories needed new technologies and workers needed new skills. Starting with twelve big manufacturers, COWS talked with executives and unions.

“It was a willingness to state the obvious, get some people together, and have some reasonably evidence-based discussion,” Rogers says. “We started with a bunch of firms in metalworking and said: ‘Hey, you guys, your work force is heading off a demographic cliff. You must have noticed this. You're also getting killed by foreign competition. Would you like to try to solve that problem? If so, we'll try to work out some sort of solution for you.’”

Partnerships began to form. Money started to flow into training programs. Firms in other industries asked to sign up. Before long, COWS was coordinating a major nongovernmental program that was making a genuine difference in Wisconsin's economy.

“You might think labor wouldn’t like us because we’re elite,” Rogers says. “No, not at all. You might think that all business would hate us. No, actually not, because the great competition for decent firms is not labor. It’s other, *indecent* firms—the scumbag competitors that are eating their bottom line, that are taking the routine work they need to amortize the bigger investments they’re making in plant and equipment and training.

“So it didn’t take long to get better firms, like Johnson Controls, to say, ‘Look, if you could actually get a training consortium going, we could participate. It would raise standards in the industry and it would block some of our competition. We would love that.’”

The effort that emerged was dubbed the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership. By 2000, WRTP’s partners in business and labor had invested some \$100 million in training and modernization. Productivity and wages rose and some 6,000 new jobs were created.

The initiative has since branched into non-manufacturing sectors, including hospitality, health care, construction, technology, and transportation, covering firms with some 65,000 employees in all. Former U.S. Commerce Secretary Robert Reich often cited it as a model during the Clinton administration, and it has been widely imitated in other states.

“I grew up thinking I believed in the Sermon on the Mount and the Gettysburg Address,” Rogers says. “This has increasingly made me a wild-eyed radical. I’d like to resist a lot of that [ideological labeling]. Not because I believe in, you know, ‘pushing beyond the envelope’ and ‘blah, blah, blah’—an alternative set of clichés—but because, if you define it as a left-wing view to believe you should have a democracy—which is of the people, obviously, and by them, in some plausible way, and for them—if that becomes a left-wing view, then that’s just giving up too much, in my view. Way too much.”

**Enlist Business**  
**The Center for the Future of Arizona**

*Founded: 2003*

*Annual budget: \$1.2 million*

*Recent funders: Bruce T. Halle Family Foundation*

By the year 2000, it made little sense to think of Latinos as a minority in Arizona, and certainly not in the state's schools. By that time they already comprised more than half the high school population in both Phoenix and Tucson, the state's largest metropolitan areas. Yet Latino youth were graduating from high school at a rate 20 percent lower than the state average. In an influential report titled "Five Shoes Waiting to Drop on Arizona's Future," public-policy analysts expressed the stakes bluntly: "Arizona's future economic and social well-being depends heavily on erasing the educational deficits of the state's young Hispanic residents." It was a slow-motion crisis-in-the-making. That made it a tailor-made target for the Center for the Future of Arizona, a fledgling think-and-do tank that was searching for a project that would: a) be critical to the state's future; b) lend itself to specific goal-setting and measurable progress; and c) attract the support of the state's business leaders.

"I don't think anything of significance gets done in any of our states that doesn't have a very substantial public-private partnership," said Lattie Coor, who founded the Center for the Future of Arizona soon after retiring from the presidency of Arizona State University. "And not just a token partnership, but a fundamental partnership."

For years, Coor, who still holds an endowed chair in public policy at ASU, had lamented the gap between theory and practice in public life. University experts had great ideas for solving problems, he believed, but too few ideas were translated into action. So Coor decided to start an independent organization that could act as a broker between thinkers and civic leaders.

He and his colleagues agreed on working principles: They would stay small, pursuing no more than three projects at a time. Upon choosing an issue, they would collaborate with existing networks of movers and shakers to sharpen policy options and develop coalitions. They would pledge to stick with the issue for at least five years. Then they would decide whether to give the effort a longer life on its own, perhaps by spinning off an independent 501c3, or by finding it a home in a university or other public entity.

They worked on a vision statement (which ultimately was boiled down to a single page), then chose the Latino graduation rate as their first specific target.

The point person was Dr. Mary Jo Waits, then at the Morrison School of Public Policy at ASU and the key figure behind "Five Shoes Waiting to Drop on Arizona's Future."

Waits flipped the usual research model on its head. Instead of searching for what was wrong among failing Latino students, she asked what was right in Latino schools that were doing well. She borrowed the question from the business consultant Jim Collins' best-selling *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*. What Collins had done with businesses, Waits proposed to do with heavily Latino high schools—find out why some were succeeding where statistically comparable schools weren't. She figured this would not only make for a compelling analysis; it would also appeal to CEOs, since Collins' strategy was all the rage in business circles. Waits pitched the idea to Coor, who happened to know Collins' co-author. That led to Collins himself getting involved as a consultant, which brought a flood of good publicity at the kick-off.

"More and more," Waits says, "we're all learning that the big changes in public policy really are happening with the business community. When they decide to push something, it probably gets things moving."

With backing from key business groups, the researchers went to work. They found 331 elementary and middle schools with high poverty populations and more than half Latino students. Then, among those, they found a dozen schools that were, as Coor put it, "knocking the socks off" the others in 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade reading

and 8<sup>th</sup>-grade math scores. Next, they spent months in those twelve schools, surfacing finally to write up a half-dozen basic strategies that every other school could apply. Now, in a program called “Beat the Odds,” the Center has enlisted 25 pilot schools to try the plan, with hopes of getting every Latino-heavy school in the state involved—all with a goal of raising the Latino graduation rate by 12 percent by 2012, or “12 by ‘12.”

Coor is less quick than other analysts to say partisanship is worse than it used to be. In fact, his first public-policy job was in Michigan, where he served as an aide to Democratic Governor John Swainson in the early 1960s, and he says Michigan politics in that era was already plenty partisan. What counts in any era, he says, is to forge cooperation among society’s various sectors, all working in harness toward the common good.

“The parties are a piece of the whole, just as, historically, business has been a piece of the whole,” Coor says. “But the whole has got to be defined in a way that brings them all in. And neutral, credible parties are the ones that can do that.”

**Help Everybody**  
**The Iowa Policy Project**

*Founded: 2001*

*Annual budget: \$350,000*

*Recent funders: McKnight Foundation, Stoneman Family Foundation, Mott Foundation, Retirement Research Foundation*

The Iowa Policy Project was the brainchild of Iowa's AFL-CIO, whose president was hoping for a counterweight to a far-right public-policy group in the state. And its founding director, David Osterberg, was a former Democratic legislator. So, although the nonpartisan Project has no organizational tie either to the union (which remains only a small funder) or to the Democratic party, it has to live with the state media's invariable label: "Left-leaning think tank."

To counter that perception and establish credibility across the political spectrum, the group works determinedly to be an equal-opportunity provider of information and analysis. When IPP contracts out a job of research, it goes with the results, no matter what party or interest the facts appear to favor.

"We're always surprised by our research," Osterberg says. "When we hire a professor to do our work, we're stuck with what they turn out. Our legislative strategy is: Get it out to *all* the legislators. Get it out to the relevant committees. We send out our stuff to everybody, then hope people will come back to us and make use of it."

Witness the Project's recent work on a series of issues. They unrelated to each other except in one respect: all were important to farmers and other agribusinesses, the most powerful economic group in Iowa.

The first was a bill in the legislature to give tax credits to small, local producers of wind power.

"The Republicans came to us," Osterberg says. "We had the data on how much better it was to have it locally owned and locally financed, rather than big wind farms. That's a good Republican issue."

Not long afterward, IPP came down hard on the owners of giant "concentrated area feeding operations," commonly known as feedlots (mostly for hogs), saying the operations had caused widespread damage to groundwater supplies, especially in heavily rural counties, without delivering promised improvements in local economies.

Farm groups and their Republican allies were furious.

Then, just recently, the Project produced a report showing that Iowa farmers could sell more of their produce inside the state—and cut the inflow of produce from distant states—if some relatively simple policies were put in place to help farmers establish better local marketing networks, including better ties to the school districts.

Next thing the Project people knew, pro-farmer advocacy groups, including the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, were asking them for more information. Project experts put together a package which the farm groups then used to lobby the state for funds to help farmers and school districts get together on a produce program. It worked—meaning that a Democratic legislature gave funding to an elected Republican Secretary of Agriculture for a program that would benefit farmers, schoolchildren, and—indirectly, because of reduced highway transport—the Iowa environment.

In each case, the Iowa Policy Project's research turned out to be solid.

"I think that's a perfect example of how it's possible to be nonpartisan, and why it matters to have the facts," Osterberg says. "You have to be accurate. You have to do fact-checking. And you can't ever screw up. That's the predicament we are in all the time. We have a lot of enemies out there, and they are going to take advantage any time we make a mistake. We're always up front, but we're always very, very accurate."

## **Reform Government First** **California Forward**

*Founded: 2007*

*Annual budget: \$5 million*

*Funders: James Irvine Foundation, The California Endowment, Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation*

California has been struggling with a fiscal crisis for nearly a decade. A white-knight centrist governor has enjoyed little more success in untying the knot than the bitterly divided legislature. Of all the dysfunctional governments in the nation, the Golden State's is perhaps the most notorious, since the futures of some 38 million residents hang in the balance.

In 2005, leaders of five of the state's largest foundations met and decided to do something. They asked several good-government groups to figure out why earlier reform efforts had failed, then to recommend new ideas. A plan emerged to create a new organization called California Forward, one of the most ambitious and best-funded of the state-based think-and-do tanks. So far it is a single 501c3 organization, but it will soon spin off a 501c4—a political advocacy effort. Opening its doors in September 2007, it's so new it's barely more than a staff with a plan. But the plan alone is instructive.

Jim Mayer is California Forward's executive director. He started as a journalist at the *Sacramento Bee*, then spent ten years in state government evaluating the performance of public agencies. As head of a small public-policy group called New California Network, he played a central role in working out a strategy for the new organization. He explained how the foundations and the good-government groups, working in concert, decided to pursue basic reforms in governance and budget-making:

Partisanship in California had become so ferocious that *any* proposal to solve a specific problem was cut down by the whipsaw of political rivalry. Obviously, good solutions had to be the ultimate goal. But to get there, the good-government advisors said, state government first had to be put back in working order. That led to this formulation of the think-and-do tank's goals:

- 1) *Improve California's institutions of governance to become more fair, transparent, representative of and responsive to the needs and preferences of the state's residents;*
- 2) *Improve the fiscal performance of state and local governments by strengthening budgeting processes and making systems of generating, allocating, and sharing revenues both rational and equitable;*
- 3) *Improve opportunities for communication between Californians and public officials, and strengthen ability for residents to participate more effectively in elections and other means of governance; and,*
- 4) *Clarify the roles, responsibilities and authorities of state and local governments and agencies to make them more efficient, effective and rational.*

“We seriously don't say, ‘Our goal is this, this and this’ in terms of solutions,” Mayer says. “Our goal is a legislature that is responsive and representative of the state—because it's not at the moment. Our goal is a budget process that is understandable by the public and is well informed [about] the results of the dollars invested. That's not what our budget process does now. So that's how we've characterized the goals. There's a bunch of different ways to get there.”

This meant California Forward must be really and truly bipartisan

The foundations said they wanted a politically neutral project, Mayer recalls, but “then they listed five things they wanted to change, and it was the Democratic playbook. There wasn't one thing on there that I could walk into the Senate Republican leader and say, ‘Here's what we want to do,’ and have him say, ‘Great, I'm on board.’”

Instead, the planners came to recognize that the only measures worth pursuing were those that could garner support from broad and truly bipartisan coalitions.

“Even if someone says, ‘Yeah, this will be a bipartisan effort,’ it depends on which Republicans and which Democrats,” Mayer says. “Because if this is really about leftist Democrats and moderate Republicans, it’s not really bipartisan. And if this about a bipartisan group that champions the issue of raising taxes, that’s not really bipartisan.”

Enlist the public.

“We know we need to create a constituency for change that can be a counterbalance to the stalemate in the legislature,” Mayer says. “The public, on most issues, isn’t nearly as polarized as the elected officials are.”

So the mission statement promises that “public engagement will be a cornerstone of all activity – building an expectation among California’s diverse communities that government can be more responsive and more competent, and everyone will be measurably better for it.”

The group is enlisting regional and local “influentials” from across the state in a large, advisory Leadership Council. And the group will use public engagement techniques like AmericaSpeaks’ “21<sup>st</sup>-century town halls” and so-called deliberative polling, which seeks to move the public toward better-informed consensus on shared challenges.

“If McDonald’s can figure out how much milk people like in their cheese,” Mayer says, “we can figure out what people want from their government.”

As California Forward starts to undertake specific projects, it will begin with research, then move into a step-by-step search for solutions. That might begin simply by providing a neutral space for leaders to talk about research findings; then add a facilitator; then enlist a team of business, labor and local leaders to present legislators with a plan and ask for commitments. Proceed by small steps.

California Forward’s agenda for structural forms is a lengthy list, including “electoral representation (including redistricting and term limits); election administration; voter information, communication, access, and civic engagement; campaign financing; the ballot initiative process; the state budget process; fiscal management; tax rationalization; state/local realignment; and the legislative process.”

But it has no intention of swallowing all that work in one gulp. Organizers plan to proceed deliberately, selecting no more than three or four projects to work on at once and seeking opinions from local leaders. They’ll ask what issues are most important, and what solutions are “most achievable”—in short, the ones most likely to build a track record, which in turn can build momentum toward further successes.

“This isn’t about recommendations for reengineering the whole system,” Mayer says. “It’s about bite-sized pieces that are meaningful.

“We’re thinking strategically; we’re acting incrementally.”

**Start Small**  
**Common Sense California**

*Founded: 2007*

*2007 budget: \$700,000-800,000*

*Recent funders: William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Whitman Institute, Wallace and Alexander Gerbode Foundation, Blue Shield Foundation, Rosenberg Foundation, Sidney Stern Memorial Trust*

Common Sense California started with a vow to find out what Californians really want, then use that knowledge as a powerful lever for change. It was a grand vision—too grand, the founders came to believe, in a state of 38 million people. So they scaled back and started over.

As president of Pepperdine University in Malibu, David Davenport, a conservative public-policy scholar, had watched with increasing frustration as the state's leaders failed to find common ground in one critical dispute after another, especially in the writing of a responsible state budget. Davenport became convinced that public-engagement methods—including the technique known as deliberative polling, in which citizens are carefully surveyed to see how their opinions shift when they are better informed on an issue—could help to ease the gridlock in Sacramento. With friends on both the right and left, he organized Common Sense California and began to lay plans for major efforts in public engagement.

First, in February 2007, the group sponsored a conference on public engagement. That led to an August event called “California-Speaks”—3,500 citizens in several cities listening to presentations and expressing opinions on statewide health insurance plans. It was run by the nonprofit AmericaSpeaks, a leader in the public-engagement field, which organized the event fast to coincide with Gov. Schwarzenegger's “Year of Health Care.”

The event ended up disappointing many participants. Some complained that the sponsors—several large health insurance providers—tipped the results in the direction they favored.

“If you're going to be true to the citizen-engagement process, you have to find people who are willing to take their hands off the wheel of the results,” said Pete Peterson, executive director of Common Sense California. “And that is a very hard thing to do. It's not impossible. But with these state-level engagements, you might be looking at millions of dollars to make it happen. And to find people who are willing to contribute millions, and who care more about the citizen-engagement part than what the product is going to be, is really hard. It didn't happen in California-Speaks. You had people that did care what the product was, and there was influence in a certain direction.”

Also, Peterson said, it was terribly hard for citizens to form firm opinions on such a complex problem in a single day-long meeting.

“I think some of the powers that be understood that,” he said, “and they took the report with a grain of salt. They understood that doing something like this over just a few hours wasn't going to change policy. And it hasn't.”

Watching a massive public-engagement event up close, the leaders of Common Sense California thought twice about their original strategy. The expense had been so great, the payoff so paltry. They also saw that the newly emerged and well-funded California Forward, with which they shared many goals, was targeting change at the state level. Perhaps it would be better, they reasoned, to narrow their focus to municipalities and regions. Peterson, for one, had concluded that public-engagement methods work better when participants have an immediate and personal stake in the outcome—when they see their views reflected in policy changes in their own back yards.

“When they're looking at local issues, there's just more on the table that stimulates people's participation,” says Peterson, who teaches a course on public engagement at Pepperdine. “There's something much more direct about the impact you can have at the local level.”

Local action suits Peterson's philosophical bent as well. As a conservative himself, he believes many of those on the right perceive public engagement as left-of-center, and that to catch on, public engagement needs support across the spectrum. And public-engagement on local matters is a more natural fit for conservatives than big, statewide efforts, he said.

To bring conservatives into public engagement efforts, Peterson says: "First, I would ask the question: do we buy the premise that citizens are actually becoming disengaged from their own forms of government? I think most people do buy that, on both sides of the aisle. That certainly was the reason why Common Sense California got started. But conservatives believe government's too big; they don't really see where the citizen fits in. Well, if all that is true, then how does the citizen take a greater role in his self-governance?"

That's been the subject of debate among Common Sense California board members—some liberal, some conservative. Peterson believes that public engagement at the local level offers common ground.

"I think those on the left define self-governance as efficient, responsive, governing institutions," Peterson says. "I think those on the right define self-governance as doing everything we can *outside* of governing institutions to govern ourselves, and to promote the growth of civil society. If this is a government by the people, then how do people come together to develop nongovernmental institutions, and how do people gather together with governing institutions to make them more responsive to the people?"

Groups like Common Sense California can create a neutral space—both figuratively and literally—where people of differing political convictions can work through those basic questions. And Peterson believes these discussions work best at the level of local communities. They tend to nurture the aims of liberals and conservatives alike. They often make public officials more responsive to citizens' wishes. At the same time, they often encourage private individuals to form associations that bring about solutions on their own, without the hand of government.

"There has to be a binding, a grouping, at the neighborhood and community level before you can even begin to ask bigger questions," Peterson says. "Tocqueville says if you're not bound at the community level, there's no way you can be a national citizen."

## **Defining a State's 'Defining Moment'** **The Center for Michigan**

Founded: 2006

Annual Budget: \$1 million

Recent Funders: AT&T Corp., James & Donna Brooks, Consumers Energy Foundation, Davenport University, Domino's Pizza, DTE Energy Foundation, Frey Foundation, Kresge Foundation, Meijer Corporation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Power Foundation, Stryker Johnston Foundation, Stryker Corporation, Richard & Barbara Van Dusen Fund

Phil Power is a blunt man, with blunt reasons for forming The Center for Michigan.

“When I sold my company back in 2004, I looked around to find my state in complete disarray, the political and policy systems broken, the economy going to hell. And I was damned if I was going to let the Florida sand run through my toes and stick my hands in my pockets while Michigan went to pieces. My family has had a stake in this state for generations, and I felt it was the least I could do to try to help get us out of the jam we're in. That's why I got on the phone and contacted leaders I knew from across the political spectrum to form The Center for Michigan.”

Power's roots run deep in Michigan.

His great-great-great-great-great grandfather, Arthur Power, immigrated to Michigan from upstate New York in 1824, just after the Erie Canal opened up a route to the western frontier. A Quaker, Power founded Farmington (originally called “Quakertown”), today an upper-income suburb near Detroit, and started the first Quaker meeting in Michigan. Power's great-grandfather was one of the first to plant sour cherries, now a main crop in the northern part of the state. And his father pioneered the use of microfilm as a storage and publication medium for scholarly materials.

Power himself started a newspaper company in 1965, growing over the years to include some 65 weekly and twice-weekly publications in Michigan and the upper Midwest. He sold the assets of the company to the Gannett Company in 2004. During that time, he also pursued his interest in politics and public policy, running (unsuccessfully) in the Democratic primary for U. S. Senate in 1978 and (successfully) for Regent of the University of Michigan. He was also an advisor to and appointee of various Michigan governors and politicians of both parties. Over the years, Power's weekly newspaper column traced his dismay as Michigan's economy teetered on the brink of the wholesale restructuring of the automobile industry and the political and policy system remained mired in hyper-partisanship and dysfunction.

“The idea behind The Center for Michigan was to carve out common ground away from the hyper-partisanship and to arrive at a vision for Michigan's future and a prescription for getting there,” Power said.

With the backing of a steering committee of veteran Republicans and Democrats (including Michigan corporate executives, former legislative leaders, and top advisors to governors from both parties), Power obtained IRS status as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, hired journalist John Bebow as Executive Director and launched a round of statewide conferences on the financial condition of Michigan, the tax system and education policy that drew *in all* around 1,000 people.

Then, in 2007, The Center launched a public engagement campaign called “Michigan's Defining Moment.” The objective of the campaign is to ignite and fan a citizen movement to develop a common vision for a transformed Michigan and to put forward strategies and tactics to make that vision real.

The name grew from both Michigan's troubled economic fortunes and the 2010 election when, due to term limits, the governor, speaker of the Michigan House, majority leader of the Michigan Senate, the state attorney general, the secretary of state, seventy percent of House members and three-quarters of Senate members will leave office.

“The many bipartisan leaders who launched Michigan’s Defining Moment are more concerned with what’s between the ears of the candidates who will run for those open seats than they are about the party affiliation of those candidates,” Bebow said.

And Michigan residents share the MDM founders’ frustration. According to an early 2008 poll conducted for the Center for Michigan by Michigan State University, state residents desperately desire bipartisan cooperation and problem-solving from lawmakers in the state Capitol. But a majority of residents see little or no evidence that Democrats and Republicans are working together in Lansing to find solutions to Michigan’s problems and challenges.

Bebow pointed to three specific results from the poll to illustrate the intense need for the Michigan’s Defining Moment public engagement campaign:

The poll asked how important it is to Michigan’s future for Republican and Democratic lawmakers to cooperate with each other in developing solutions to Michigan’s problems and challenges. Respondents were asked to give a one-to-10 ranking, with 10 being “very important.” Fifty-eight percent of respondents gave a 10 ranking. Eighty-three percent of respondents gave a ranking of eight or higher. Asked how much Republican and Democratic state legislators are currently working together to craft solutions, just over 50 percent of respondents said “only a little” or “not at all.” Five percent said “quite a bit.” Less than one percent said “a lot.”

Michigan respondents lay the blame for partisan gridlock at the feet of both parties. Two-thirds of poll respondents say both parties need to compromise to solve Michigan’s problems and challenges. Thirteen percent said Democrats need to compromise the most. Twenty percent said Republicans need to compromise the most.

IPPSR conducted the poll of 1012 Michigan adults between late January and late March. The poll had a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percent.

The Michigan’s Defining Moment public engagement campaign is designed to construct a vision and agenda for Michigan’s future that develops from the bottom up, not from the top down. The method is to hold “community conversations” all over Michigan—small groups of citizens brought together by community leaders. Discussions begin with participants talking about what they want Michigan’s future to be like. Then they discuss strategies and tactics that would work best to achieve the vision. Assistance in planning and holding the conversations is provided by The Center’s partner, Public Sector Consultants, Inc., a well-regarded, Lansing-based consulting firm.

Round 1 Community Conversations took place in October-November, 2007. Initially planned for 80 events and around 1,000 participants, the Campaign wound up with 96 sessions and 1,500 participants whose demographic diversity reflects Michigan’s statewide population. A formal small-group-dynamics protocol was written; facilitators trained; and scribes taught to use the same methodology in reporting, so that results from any one conversation could be rolled into an accurate reflection of all. A preliminary report showed that most people held a virtuous circle vision for Michigan: A talented, skilled workforce attracted by an unparalleled quality of life resulting in a thriving, diversified economy.

Round 2 Community Conversations began in early spring 2008, and focus more tightly on strategies and tactics to bring the vision to reality and features a comprehensive “Michigan Scorecard.” A collaboration of journalist Bebow and others, including noted Michigan State University economics professor Charles Ballard, the scorecard is a benchmarking exercise comparing Michigan with other states. It can be updated annually to measure progress.

The results of the two rounds of community conversations form a common ground agenda and vision for Michigan’s future and a roadmap of how to get there. The Center hopes to make that report the primary subject for political discourse in the state, beginning in the 2008 election and culminating in that watershed election of 2010.

Next, in summer 2008, the Center will address hyperpartisanship at its roots – the primary campaigns of candidates for 44 open Michigan House seats. Participants in the community conversations will meet with candidates to discuss not if, but how they would implement the MDM agenda if elected and sent to Lansing.

In fall 2008, the public engagement campaign will be greatly expanded through a new phase of community conversations and wide distribution of citizen toolkits designed to aid residents' efforts to implement the MDM agenda in their communities. The Center has hired three full-time "engagement coordinators" who will be on the road every day, mobilizing residents to "spend a little time on the future of your state."

The Center aims to build membership to 10,000 by the time the 2010 election arrives. It's a tough task, but Bebow distributes a weekly public policy and current events email newsletter called "Fresh Thoughts for Michigan's Transformation" to help keep MDM participants focused on the agenda and tasks at hand. The newsletter subscription base has grown from a 400 in June 2006 to 4,000 two years later.

The Center's bipartisan steering committee has also tasked the Center with establishing a "bipartisan beachhead in Lansing." The Michigan legislature has been the arena for fiercely partisan battles for years and came perilously close to breakdown in trying to pass a budget in fall 2007. A subcommittee of more than 100 statewide "founding champions" who started MDM is now engaged in nurturing a "transformation caucus" in the legislature. It's a bipartisan, bicameral grouping of lawmakers who are "prepared to put the future of their state ahead of scoring partisan political points," Power said. Off the record, confidential dinners for legislators from both parties and MDM participants have resulted in a growing realization, by both citizens and elected officials, that "things don't have to be this bad and they're prepared to do something about it," Power said.

At the end of the day, Power says the Center is not interested in becoming a third political party. "Anybody who reads American history knows that won't work," says Power. Nor is the Michigan's Defining Moment campaign a stalking horse for any one person's political ambitions. "I ran for the U.S. Senate in 1978 and lost," Power explains. "And I ran for the University of Michigan Board Of Regents. I won once and lost once. I'm 69. I've been there. I don't need it. And there is no way whatsoever I will be candidate for any public office."

Instead, the objective is to call forth a new, practical, competent, pragmatic, non-ideological civic leadership that can do what Michigan needs to do to transform itself. "If times weren't so bad, this would be a nearly impossible challenge," Power says. "But it's becoming clear that Michigan really is at a hinge in its history. We have the opportunity – which happens only very, very rarely – to take the history of our state into our own hands. The decisions that will be made over the next 10 years or so will go a long way to determine what kind of place Michigan will be for the next 50 to 75 years," Power asserts.

And for those who see him as a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Don Quixote, Power likes to quote the anthropologist Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."