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Politics and Advocacy: A Dilettante's View of Archival Activism

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"Politics is the art of preventing people from taking part in affairs which properly concern them."
Paul Valery (Tel Quel, 1943)

Valery's clever and incisive observation too often accurately portrays how the business of governing actually works. Representational democracy on a large scale requires filtration and compromise to ensure that the majority rules while considering minority rights. However, such a system fosters an aloofness among elected and appointed officials that often leaves the average citizen feeling alienated and powerless. Governance largely relies on sustaining personal apathy or at least the wide public perception that political engagement be left to the professionals, despite the far-reaching impact of policy outcomes. Valery's statement might be tongue-in-cheek, but it offers the important lesson that citizens and interested groups should not take for granted their place at the table of public policy.

In June of this year I had the dubious honor of testifying in front of a congressional committee during the Louisiana State Legislative Session. My testimony was in response to a public records bill that had passed through the State Senate and was under consideration in the House Committee for Governmental Affairs. It was an honor because I was allowed to represent the officers and executive board of the Louisiana Archives and Manuscript Association (LAMA), of which I am an active member. (1) I had been following the progress of the bill in question and had drafted a letter in opposition that was endorsed by the LAMA leadership and forwarded to committee staff. Along with two other LAMA colleagues, I accepted an invitation to the meeting. I characterize the experience as dubious because our appearance was arranged with very little notice, I was not entirely sure what to expect, and as I sat through the meeting before making my statement it became apparent that whatever we had to say would not make any difference.

The piece of legislation in question - Louisiana Senate Bill 278 - ostensibly provides greater disclosure of records created by and under the stewardship of the Louisiana governor's office. (2) The bill redresses some of the issues that have long plagued public access to a powerful and secretive office, but it also raises some troubling uncertainties for actual transparency, accountability, and the long-term disposition of the governor's records. Under the new law certain records are exempt from public disclosure, particularly any records having to do with the "deliberative process" of the governor's offices. Taken to its legal extreme the "deliberative process" could potentially include any business in which the governor's offices are involved. SB 278 was hailed by its supporters as a giant leap forward in public accountability and the fulfillment of the governor's promises of openness and transparency. The bill was shepherded through the ratification process by administration partisans and enjoyed tremendous support in both chambers. Though some dissent was voiced, all amendments and language addressing immediate and long-term retention and access were rejected in favor of an ambiguously-worded, highly-interpretable law that might not actually serve its nominal purpose. Where before the issue of records disclosure was simply not addressed by law, it now codifies privilege in a way that tacitly endorses secrecy. SB 278 was signed into law on July 10, 2009.

Now, I have never been a wide-eyed optimist and I did not expect a Jimmy Stewart moment to occur at the meeting, where my erudition and passion rends the hearts and minds of the most stubborn career politicians. The point of being there was to make sure that LAMA's objections to

the bill were raised and included in the congressional record. Under the best case scenario our objections would have sparked further debate and perhaps a reconsideration of amendments that had been rejected. The LAMA camp appeared to be in good company, with representatives from press and citizen organizations voicing similar concerns. I had hoped for some exchange of ideas or at least a discussion on the merits of our disagreement. However, what I surely did not expect was the mild contempt and visible disinterest that some legislators on the committee showed those who came to the meeting to voice their opposition. At the risk of overstating my annoyance, it appeared that they reserved particular rancor for the LAMA group. My colleagues and I left the meeting feeling as if we had been asked, "Who the hell are you are you, and what the hell are you doing here?" In other words, we felt exactly like the political amateurs that we are.

That I acted on my conscience and in the interests of my chosen profession was of little comfort and I have since devoted a great deal of thought to how this experience might inform my career as an archivist going forward. Before my legislative adventure I was the type of person who would gladly write a letter or send an email if I found something politically bothersome or offensive, but these were usually isolated instances driven by a visceral reaction instead of a personal conviction. I had no problem participating in discussions at conferences, or attending meetings with like-minded professionals to advocate on behalf of historical records, but I was generally not one to proselytize on the righteousness of our cause. I did whatever I could to assist the research efforts of other archivists in the hopes that such work would result in greater public exposure of an important issue or increased funding for an essential program. But as far as direct political engagement as an archives professional, my experience was that just mentioned. As it happens I am a political dilettante, which I now realize is not entirely rare within the archives profession. I also realize that it simply is not enough and a more active approach to building political alliances and gaining experience in the political arena should be a top priority for individual archivists and their organizations.

Political participation amongst archivists is potentially hampered on several fronts. The political environment can be intimidating and discouraging at all levels of government. There is a clear delineation between those who have access and those who do not - between the players and the spectators. We like to believe that our elected representatives and appointed bureaucrats have our best interests in mind and that the honor system works among honorable people. As archivists we too rely on the honor system and expect the public to trust that we know what we are doing and have the interests of both the records and the broader community in mind. Politics and archives are both emblematic of power, yet their convergence illuminates a bitter irony in how power is appropriated and exercised; for all the talk of the power of archives, most archivists and archival institutions are subject to political forces over which they have little or no control. The average archivist is relatively powerless when it comes to things like resource allocation and legal frameworks for records. If one (as I do) works at an archives under public sponsorship, one's political involvement is likely even more limited. Many states, cities, and other municipalities have strict prohibitions on using a paid position for political advocacy, regardless of how a particular law or policy might affect that position. All of this is compounded by the nature of our work; crippling backlogs, laborious attention to detail, juggling responsibilities, managing scarce resources, and all of the other elements that make being an archivist alternately rewarding and frustrating.

Given this questionable admixture of conditions, archivists need to find outlets through which to solidify and wield political influence. The goal of archives is to present as complete and accurate a historical record as possible by mitigating both the incidental and purposeful damage done over time. Fortunately, archivists have a fairly involved network of organizations at all levels through which public records accountability and, in turn, historical accuracy might be promoted. In his presidential address at the 2008 Society of American Archivists annual meeting, Mark Greene

identified ten core values of the archival profession. (3) Among these was activism, which Greene said consists of agency, advocacy, and the active documentation of underrepresented and marginal groups within society. (4) Greene calls for multilateral advocacy — from the grassroots to the halls of the U.S. Congress - with particular focus on organizations backed by dues paying members. (5) Having an organization to take the lead on record, information, and archival issues at the national level is certainly an asset that benefits all archivists, but the majority of ground-level advocacy will be and should be more localized. Groups like LAMA need to make a name for themselves, on their own terms, with those who have political influence over the objects, institutions, and purpose of our livelihood.

So based on Greene's vision of archival activism and my own limited experience, here are a few observations and suggestions that might help those interested in re-calibrating their political mindset:

1. Use the profession and all of the resources and connections it might provide, but do not be limited by it.

Archival organizations need to take the lead in direct political advocacy for archival interests, however it requires a personal commitment to initiate action in individual and localized settings. Banner organizations like the SAA and LAMA are only as strong as their component parts and must rely on their membership to identify instances where archival interests are not being sufficiently addressed. Press releases, official position statements, and letters to elected officials should all be utilized and require the endorsement of organizations to be effective. However, individual members need to take it upon themselves to do the leg work. Advocacy is an ongoing process and after a while it becomes as much about whom you know as what you do. In my recent experience at the Louisiana Legislature associates of the Baton Rouge Advocate newspaper and the Baton Rouge League of Women Voters chapter also spoke out against SB 278. I can't help but think that our collective case could have been made more effectively had there been some collaboration beforehand. But the point is there are other groups and individuals outside of the archival profession who have similar interests, albeit for different reasons. Relationships with them need to be sought out.

2. Pick your battles before the fighting occurs.

All archivists need to ask themselves, "What are the issues that affect me?" Seldom does a day go by without some sort of news story, list serve announcement, or other widely disseminated notice about issues that impact archivists and archival work. If you do not already have an issue, keep looking and one will likely find you before too long. When it does, you need to gain as much expertise about it as possible. The aforementioned organizational connections will help in doing this, but you also need to consider the venues that you will be working in and try to get a sense of the political climate surrounding that particular issue. This means preparation, distilling arguments, and marshalling support to optimize impact. The time you devote to one archival battle is time taken away from another, so having a workable strategy is essential. This does not mean we should only pick fights that we can win; we should pick the fights that are most important to maintaining our core professional values, even if these stand no chance of prevailing in a particularly adverse situation. Sometimes raising your voice pro or con is all you can do and you must take comfort in the hope that history will prove you right.

3. Be prepared to eat crow until someone knows who you are.

The bane of archival profession's existence has long been that few people have any idea what we

do, much less an informed opinion about what is important to us. This problem of identity and perception has been repeated ad nauseum in the professional literature, almost to a point where it has become a self-perpetuating reality that archivists simply accept. In all efforts at advocacy and outreach we need to get past this sheepishness. We must turn our ongoing identity crisis into opportunity, when such opportunities present themselves. This means continuing to do what we do (i.e. writing letters, going to meetings), but also devoting time to something new, maybe even something outside of our comfort zone. For example, if an advocacy email or letter to an elected official goes unanswered, make a phone call or drop by their office. There are ways to be aggressive without being rude, and if we really believe in what we are doing we should be able to communicate this to others. The point is that until we demand and seek out recognition on a personal basis we cannot expect people to know our concerns or care about them. And if your local congressman or councilwoman (or their staffs) see your face enough times it will only be more and more difficult for them to ignore what you have to say. Who knows: you might even start to like each other.

4. All politics are local, which increases the probability of making a difference.

Archivists and archival organizations are not wealthy entities. They generally cannot afford to hire lawyers and lobbyists to do their political dirty work. But that is not necessarily a disadvantage, especially at the local level. Advocacy starts in your institution and branches outward through research, public instruction, and community interaction. A simple commitment to be at a certain place at a given time for a specific reason can lead to much larger things. For example, our group's testimony at the SB 278 committee meeting was unprecedented for the LAMA organization. Though my colleagues and I were unable to influence the situation in any significant way, it is one more door that is now open - one more experience that might inform future efforts. As a bonus, we were able to identify a few state legislators who appear to share our concerns about public records policy and who might be convinced to hear us out on future matters. One state senator has agreed to address the LAMA group at our annual meeting this fall. Small, seemingly insignificant steps to be sure, but the seeds of a working political relationship have been sown. Now it's just a matter of following through.

As archivists it is imperative that we assert ourselves in the affairs that properly concern us because we cannot rely on the nobility of our cause or our unique place in the culture and information world to do so on its own. The political game is rough and has little regard for weak-kneed practitioners of an arcane discipline. Lack of engagement has the potential to not only diminish our livelihood and professional aspirations, it has real implications for the quality of our citizenship. Inaction promotes a sort of passive violence against our historical and cultural legacy — the very thing most of us went into archives to protect. Archivists need to respond with enthusiasm and creativity because nobody else is going to on our behalf. Yes, it will require greater demands on our already overtaxed schedules. Yes, it will require us to deal with that strange species of human — the career politician. But it will also help to build alliances outside of the traditional archival bailiwick and reinforce public interest in the issues that are important to archivists. Will direct advocacy and political engagement solve the problems that many of us face in an era of shrinking budgets and declining institutional support? I don't know, but I intend to find out and I refuse to be complicit in my own demise.

Notes

1. For more information on the Louisiana Archives and Manuscripts Association, see <http://nutrias.org/lama/lama.htm>

2. For more information on Senate Bill 278, see the Louisiana Legislature website (<http://www.legis.state.la.us/>). For an opposing view of the bill see the Louisiana Public Affairs Research Council website (<http://www.la-par.org/article.cfm?id=268&cateid=2>)
3. Greene, M. "The Power of Archives: Archivists Values and Value in the Postmodern Age," *American Archivist*, 72, Spring/Summer, 2009: 17-41.
4. Ibid, 25.
5. Ibid, 26-27.

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