

Citizens for Special-Interest Government

EDWARD ACHORN

IF YOU DOUBT that the public-employee unions call the shots in Rhode Island, consider the narrow defeat Nov. 2 of a constitutional convention that might have let citizens reform state government.

It was the unions that masterminded the 52 to 48-percent downfall of the convention measure, successfully blocking that citizen-involvement avenue until at least 2016.

The unions' leading role may come as a surprise, since they cleverly hid behind such front men as Philip West, of Common Cause, and Gary Sasse, of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council, who feared that a convention would be costly and might produce proposals that would ill-serve Rhode Island.

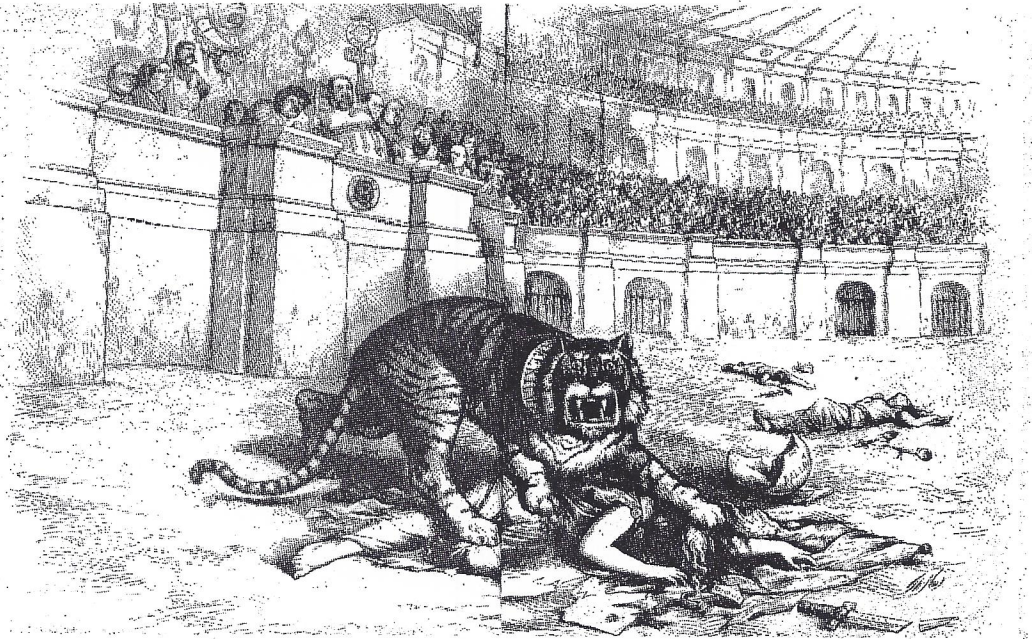
But public records tell an interesting story. A group bearing the pretty name of Citizens for Representative Government filed a report with the state Board of Elections that indicated where it had gotten the money to run the phone banks, air the TV and radio ads, and print the posters that scared voters away from the idea of a citizens' convention.

The Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals kicked in \$7,500; the National Education Association of Rhode Island, \$7,500; the Rhode Island AFL-CIO, \$4,000; Working RI (which touts itself as an organization that represents 100,000 union members), \$3,000; Ocean State Action, a coalition of community and labor organizations, \$1,500. The American Civil Liberties Union also contributed \$2,500.

And that's only part of it. Someone produced those TV and radio ads, and the script of the phone messages; it was Guy Dufault, the gambling and labor lobbyist. (He was not only the secretary-treasurer of Citizens for Representative Government in 1996 — when it squashed a voter-initiative movement — but his company, Cornerstone Communications Group Inc., also collected \$18,800 that year from the group for "public relations and advertising.") Strangely, the new report did not cite the cost of public relations and advertising production, as either an expense or an in-kind contribution. (Mr. Dufault says his bill was \$1,000.)

The coalition held its strategy meetings at the local offices of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals (RIFTHP), the National Association of Social Workers, and Ocean State Action. Marcia Reback, president of RIFTHP, played a leading role.

Why, then, were Mr. West and Mr. Sasse the ones who were invited to denounce the



This famous 1871 cartoon by Thomas Nast ("The Tammany Tiger Loose — 'What Are You Going To Do About It?' ") depicts a corrupt political organization savaging representative democracy.

convention on Mr. Dufault's TV show? "I think they recognized that it might work against them if Marcia Reback was their spokesman," said Mr. West.

Voters, you see, are becoming increasingly aware that the public-employee unions are not acting like their friends anymore. Their money and power are preserving a one-party legislation that runs roughshod over citizens, breeding corruption, arrogantly serving the few at the expense of the many, promoting high taxes, stifling job creation and defending second-rate schools. Voters thus might well have questioned the special interests' motives had those interests put their own faces on the anti-convention effort.

Now, ask yourself: Why would unions and gambling interests be so dead-set against allowing 75 elected citizens in Rhode Island a chance to gather in a convention?

Their answer would be as sugar-coated as the name of their coalition, but the truth seems clear enough: Citizens for Representative Democracy want government that represents *their* interests, and no one else's. They already control the General Assembly, and thus hold a near monopoly on political power at the state level. Controlling a majority of 75 newly elected convention delegates would have been expensive or impossible.

And those citizens might have stirred up trouble for the public-employee unions by shifting political power back toward the general interest, by passing such measures as a line-item veto for the governor, reform of the courts, an inspector general to root out gov-

ernment fraud, or a mandate requiring the General Assembly to follow open-meeting and public-record laws.

They had to stop such reforms in their tracks. So they did.

To be sure, the defeat of reform was democracy at work. Citizens lined up on one side (notably, Operation Clean Government), special interests on the other, and in this case the special interests convinced the voters. Ironically, the unions' argument was that a convention would open the floodgates to "political mischief" — though, surely, it would be difficult to top the mischief regularly perpetrated by General Assembly leaders! Moreover, any mischief passed by a constitutional convention — unlike the Assembly's — would have had to pass muster with the voters.

Still, if there's anything Rhode Islanders didn't need more of, it's political mischief. Enough people were scared into voting against the convention.

But I have to believe the vote would have gone the other way had citizens fully known the role that the special interests were playing in that fight.

Why am I reporting this now? Because it might help voters the next time to reflect on how politics really works in the Ocean State — in the murky waters below the surface, where the special interests and their lobbyists thrive.

Edward Achorn is *The Journal's* deputy editorial-pages editor. His e-mail address is eachorn@projo.com.