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C O M M

Hiding behind Mr. O'Brien

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THE PEOPLE WHO LED the fight against a constitutional convention in Rhode Island — members of an organization called Citizens for Representative Government — went to great lengths to cover their tracks. But all roads seem to lead to Guy Dufault, the labor and gambling lobbyist.

The public-employee unions put up the money to run phone banks, air TV and radio ads, and print posters in narrowly defeating a constitutional convention, 52 to 48 percent, on Nov. 2. Mr. Dufault acknowledged on Friday that he had filled out most of the group's campaign finance report now on file with the Rhode Island Board of Elections.

But you wouldn't know of Mr. Dufault's role by reading that public document. He kept that carefully hidden from the public.

The report — dated Oct. 24, and stamped received by the Rhode Island Board of Elections on Nov. 4, two days after the election — was signed by its "chairman, treasurer," a man named Edward O'Brien. Nowhere does Mr. Dufault's name appear.

The address of both Citizens for Representative Government and Mr. O'Brien was given as 9 Court House Lane, East Greenwich. I had some questions about the report, so I called the phone number listed.

There was an answering machine with a woman's voice on it. I left a message asking if Mr. O'Brien could give me a call. I called back days later — only to get the answering machine again. On my third try, a woman answered, and told me that Mr. O'Brien lived there, but was away "on business" in Florida.

Knowing (by asking around) that Mr. Dufault had played a role in the campaign, in producing its television and radio spots, and had been treasurer in 1996 for Citizens for Representative Government, I called him and asked him about Edward O'Brien. He told me that Mr. O'Brien lived in Narragansett and was a member of Common Cause, which had joined in the coalition to defeat the constitutional convention, and he promised to get me a phone number for him. Then he didn't call back.

I called Philip West, at Common Cause. He checked into it and said that Mr. O'Brien was not a member.

I asked several political sources if they had ever heard of this Mr. O'Brien. They had not. I asked Robert Arruda, of Operation Clean Government — a group that had fought hard for a constitutional convention, and lost — if he had heard of Mr. O'Brien. He hadn't.

But his group found out that 9 Court House Lane was the voting address of Guy Dufault.

And that a silver Mercedes-Benz convertible owned by Guy Dufault was parked outside. I called the house's co-owner, Stephen Cornwall, and confirmed that Guy Dufault was a tenant, but Mr. Cornwall had never rented to an Edward O'Brien.

There was something else. The 1996 report by Citizens for Representative Government — signed by Guy Dufault, then treasurer — was in the same handwriting as the 2004 report, signed by the new treasurer, Mr. O'Brien.

I visited Mr. Dufault Friday.

Yes, he had filled out both reports, although Mr. O'Brien's name was on the 2004 report. Yes, there was indeed a Mr. O'Brien who was chairman-treasurer of the organization. Yes, Mr. Dufault and Mr. O'Brien both lived at 9 Court House Lane — at least, Mr. O'Brien did so during the weeks when the campaign season was in full swing, helping Mr. Dufault as an operative.

He gave me a phone number in Aventura, Fla., which proved to be a listing for an "E. O'Brien." I called and finally reached the elusive chairman-treasurer. He said for 18 years he has worked in politics, much of it "licking stamps." He was retired, and not eager to tell me what he had done before retirement. "I've had several jobs in my life," he said. His parents live in Narragansett, he said.

He said he lived at the East Greenwich address "during the summer" — last year, between August and the election. Then he returned to Florida. Mr. Dufault recalled that he left on Nov. 3, the day after the election.

What's the upshot of this?

I don't know if any of this constitutes filing and signing a false report, since it is an enormous stretch to say Mr. O'Brien resides or works at the address listed, and may be reached at the phone number given. But it does seem puzzling that Mr. Dufault and Citizens for Representative Government chose to make it so difficult for the public to find out who was running the show. Why bother?

Mr. Dufault said he was too busy to serve as treasurer, and did not have time to personally file reports. But he had time to fill out the report, and treasurers do not have to file the reports themselves.

Maybe Citizens for Representative Government did not want citizens to find out easily that it was a prominent State House lobbyist for the public-employee unions and gambling interests who fought to deny people the chance to shake up Rhode Island government with a constitutional convention. (Now, citizens will have to wait until at least 2016.)

That seems to be the way the game is played.

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