

TAKING ACCOUNT OF RACE: A PHILANTHROPIC IMPERATIVE

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The Role of Philanthropy in Public Policy

Philanthropy, both institutional and individual, does many things. It supports our universities and colleges, underwrites social service programs, sponsors research, subsidizes the arts and culture and assists local grassroots organizations. In addition, our philanthropic community has been engaged for almost one hundred years in helping shape both national and local public policies.

The civil rights, environmental and women's movements were fueled by both foundations and individual donors. The work of foundations helped to create and maintain public television and radio. The community development movement had many of its roots seeded by philanthropy. Many of the advances in tobacco, prison and educational reform are the products of charitable giving. And we could cite many other notable policy interventions.

But unfortunately, these successes have been due to a relative handful of foundations. Until recently, the overwhelming number of foundations stayed away from grant-making that supports policy efforts or activism on behalf of social change. For the most part, they continue to be safe, risk adverse and non-innovative.

However, this is changing. A growing number of foundations are moving into the policy arena, driven by new leadership and the demands of the times.

The issues and challenges our society is currently facing are far more complex, pressing and demanding than ever before: a dysfunctional health system; growing income and wealth inequity; climate change; substantial, lingering poverty; a political system dominated by big money; the decline of quality journalism; a failing regulatory system; and many others. Since our public and corporate sectors cannot resolve these problems by themselves, foundations

and a few major individual donors are being increasingly moved to engage in policy activities and community activism. Independent from the market place and politics, they often can do what governments cannot.

What specific roles can foundations play in shaping public policy? What should be their priority areas of focus? How should they relate to government efforts and programs? Can they help insure the accountability of our government, corporate and nonprofit sectors? What kind of advocacy and activism should philanthropy support? What can we learn from its past successes and mistakes? How can foundations themselves be reformed and made more responsive to the needs of the nonprofit community? These are the types of questions that we trust the four forums will address.

We hope all of you will join this dialogue not only today but on a continuing basis.

We have chosen race as the topic for today's forum. How we as a country deal with this critical issue will to a large extent define the strength of both our democracy and civil society. It will test our commitment to social and economic justice, and it will help determine our capacity for leadership in an increasingly pluralistic world. The question of race arouses controversy, passion, fear, tolerance and hope. But, tough as the issue is, it must be addressed directly and constructively. For philanthropy, it poses a major challenge ...and that is as it should be.

Waldemar Nielsen, the inspiration for this forum, and the namesake of our Georgetown Chair of Philanthropy, would not have wanted it any other way. As a loving critic of philanthropy, he believed strongly that foundations should not only raise their performance standards but also be more actively involved in public policy and advocacy. Long a supporter of greater risk-taking and innovation in the field, he would have encouraged and welcomed these discussions.

Nielsen was probably the last of our country's philanthropic giants. His life spanned a great variety of high level jobs and civic ventures: government administrator, diplomat, foundation executive, author, nonprofit CEO and avid board member of many organizations.

However, it was as an analyst, writer and critic of philanthropy that he reached the peak of his influence. His first book, The Big Foundations, published in 1972, is still a "must read" for all students, practitioners and beneficiaries of philanthropy. In that book, he did what no other writer had done before, exposing the rotten underbelly of many of our largest foundations previously hidden from public view by a veil of secrecy and silence. But it was not an irresponsible, wanton attack. For a person who loved foundations, it was almost a sacrilege that so

many of the large institutions at the time did not pass the test of relevancy, competence, innovation and accountability.

He did not hesitate to name names or pull any punches, and not surprisingly, he incurred the wrath of many foundations and big donors. Many never forgave him for what they believed was a breach of etiquette, if not accuracy. Telling the truth, he later commented, was more important than pleasing colleagues and friends. His later books and writings embellished the themes he had struck in his first book. Hopefully, his values and spirit will infuse these forums this year.

In kicking off today's discussions, we are fortunate to have as our keynote speaker a person very much in the Wally Nielsen tradition, a man, who despite having been an "insider" for more than a decade, has had the courage to write and speak critically about the world of philanthropy.

Gara LaMarche has been a public servant and agent for social change for most of his life. In the mid-1980's he was the Director of the Texas Civil Liberties Union, putting him in the frontlines of the battles over the death penalty. He then served as a director at the PEN Center, the world's oldest human rights and international literary organization. From there he became the Associate Director of Human Rights Watch. In his eleven years as Vice President for U.S. Programs at the Open Society Institute, he won a national reputation as an outstanding grant-maker, combining a flare for innovation and risk-taking with the courage to tackle unpopular causes. Always frank and outspoken, he appealed to grantees who, too often, received the "run-around" from many of his foundation counterparts.

Now, as the new President of Atlantic Philanthropies, one the country's largest foundations, he has the enviable task of spending out the institution's \$4 billion in assets over the next eight years. He has already begun to transform the organization into much more of an advocate for social change, social justice and human rights. Improving the life of senior citizens also has become a major interest of his, not surprising as he slowly slides toward his social security years.

Despite the heavy burden of dispensing so much money so quickly, he carries these responsibilities lightly, maintaining a keen sense of humor, writing innumerable blogs and keeping up with his interest in jazz and many other forms of music.

Few people are as well qualified and suited to launch these forums. So it is a pleasure and honor for me to introduce to you Gara LaMarche.

