

Organizing Citizen Groups is in My DNA by Ken Rubin June, 2022

Over the decades, as a community activist and advocate, I, along with others, have helped create and organize some cutting-edge citizen groups and coalitions – some succeeding, others not so much.

First, while back in 1967-68 in my home town, Winnipeg, my brother Laurie and I along with many others created a counter-culture youth group called Crypt.

Crypt provided new spaces for alternate youth - crash pads, free university courses, counselling and more.

In 1969, I helped write a national report on what authorities called the transient youth phenomenon – hippies, runaways and newbies seeking change to the adult way of doing things. Crypt, not exactly well beloved by the then mayor and establishment itself went on to be a force in Winnipeg but it did fill a service vacuum. It continued for several years and left its imprint on the city.

Next up, while being part of the nineteen-seventies consumer movement, I played a significant role in two new citizen-run groups.

One was brought about over the thirst for an alternate food marketplace and information on adopting a healthy environmentally friendly diet. It was called Canada Food Week (CFW) and worked out of the Ottawa Pollution Probe offices. CFW coordinated and organized over 300 grass-roots events in September, 1977 in over 30 cities and helped create a new public food consciousness. I did a lot of the national organizational work and produced food action kits for local use.

Canada Food Week was the forerunner of the People's Food Commission, a citizen-initiative that held hearings in 75 communities and produced a report called “The Land of Milk and Honey”. Neither group had a long-lasting impact on Canada's food industry establishment. There now is an activist group, Food Secure Canada, begun in 2006, that advocates for many of the same things and that is seeking a citizen-based national food policy but still agri-business and big food industry chains dominate the Canadian food marketplace.

One other consumer group that I helped create and coordinated was Action Bell Canada. It was a coalition of anti-poverty, indigenous and civil liberty groups, with telephone subscriber members. ABC fought for better telephone rates and more universally available telephone services. It was around from 1975 for a decade and intervened in over a dozen telecommunications hearings, getting useful data for subscribers. I'm still involved with the Public Interest Advocacy Centre who deals with telecom, broadcast, and internet issues.

As well in the nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties, I was involved in the growing environmental movement that sprung up as people began wanting a more sustainable society. Being a part of this, including serving on one environmental group's board (Friends of the Earth) in the late nineteen-eighties, where I saw first-hand these groups' efforts.

Seeing a vacuum in Ottawa, I helped create Ecovision in 1989-90, an umbrella group with interest in pressing for resolution of local environmental issues like preserving area wetlands and better home energy and green space conservation practices. It died after a few years but helped lay the groundwork for Ecology Ottawa which is a force in the local community, including in wanting a people's plan for

Ottawa's future.

I have also over forty-five years been involved in efforts to create effective freedom of information and privacy protection. Back in 1975, I joined a Ottawa-based group called ACCESS that lobbied for access to information legislation. One study I did for ACCESS, examined how MP's and Senators were having information access problems and helped successfully publicize the need for access legislation.

On the privacy side, as chair of the Information Rights Committee of the National Capital Civil Liberties Association, we put out a pamphlet on "Privacy and You" and presented the Privacy Commissioner with our positions on the growing and unnecessary uses of social insurance numbers. I authored studies on my personal information access experience and on the type of needs and problems with privacy legislation (the 1982 Privacy Act) enacted in parallel with access legislation (Access to Information Act), presenting the results to parliamentary committees and the media.

Then in 1984, I was instrumental under the then Canadian Rights and Liberties Federation, in setting up an Access Centre. The Access Centre had journalist, librarian reps as well as civil libertarians involved. It started well and raised practical problems with the federal access to information procedures. I authored a report for the Access Centre decrying the lack of retaining completed access records and we took those concerns to the House of Commons. But the Access Centre had a short existence, partly because of a lack of funding and the difficulties associated with maintaining a national citizen group.

Other freedom of information (FOI) coalitions were attempted like by Democracy Watch (Open Government Coalition) but never seemed to gel.

In 2021, I created a new coalition with journalists, civil liberty, indigenous, access to information and academic groups along with Centre for Free Expression (CFE) that I suggested operate as the Right to Information Alliance. But it was not the front-line transparency/advocacy/activist group that I had hoped for and I left. It has become at least a very loose information exchange group largely dominated by the Toronto-based CFE, is largely unknown to the public.

This May, I joined a group of journalists in Montreal at the annual Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ) conference who discussed creating their own FOI advocacy and information caucus. This would be most useful in addressing and tackling on a day-by-day basis public access problems. So far, this has not progressed into being an operating working group.

Which brings me to an effort I'm engaged in now to create an Ottawa People's Commission. Less than one week into the occupation, I saw the need for a community group to hear about residents' experiences to what was evolving into a very traumatic event as a trucker convoy was holding Ottawa residents hostage with authorities failing to act quickly.

I went about recruiting community-minded but non partisan people and drafted an outline for what I envisaged an Ottawa People's Commission doing. We began meeting in late March discussing selecting commissioners, funding and reaching residents and other endeavours underway.

That novel citizen-led inquiry has come quite a way in five months, selecting three (now four) hearing commissioners, getting an institutional administrative partner, the Centretown Community Health Centre, and obtaining their and other initial funding including from my and Debbie's advocacy fund. We had a well-publicized launch in late June.

[Note as of December 1, 2022. Since OPC's June launch, much has happened with several public hearings, zoom hearings, community consultations and written submissions. At the end of August, I had to step back from day-to-day involvement given Debbie's health but have tried to contribute when I can.]

Creating any local or national,umbrella activist groups and sustaining them is difficult. Seeking citizen civil action, justice, social change, raising public awareness and getting improvements are no easy matters to achieve.

On the whole, the Canadian civil society movement, of which there are many diverse local and national groups, is quite timid and largely dependent on government funding and mainly without mass memberships and with limited public involvement. Some groups are more successful than others in what they try to do.

There is certainly a need for new directions, setting out more ambitious social justice aims, having a greater fighting spirit, and better funding sources.

Helping create new citizen group efforts and sustaining such efforts is a road worth travelling, taking skills, persistency, good timing and allies.

So here is one more avenue to get concrete more just changes, this time through a people's commission that wants to heal Ottawa in face of a truckers occupation over three weeks last February.