



RUPERT — the bare facts

RALPH NADER'S tour of Australia last month has sparked public interest in the whole issue of the role of the community in regulating the affairs of big organisations.

Ralph Nader was the first to achieve wide acclaim for effective public interest representation in the United States. America now has numerous movements representing general interests as well as specialised organisations.

One of the bodies who co-sponsored the Nader tour is the Rupert Public Interest Movement.

Although quite a number of librarians have been members of Rupert or subscribed to the Rupert newsletter for some years, the organisation is not yet well known, particularly in its new form as a public interest movement.

Nader's view

IN THE *Sydney Morning Herald* of 21 July, under the heading 'Nader out to stop secrecy in government', it was reported that:

Ralph Nader, the American advocate of consumer rights, spoke strongly in favour of freedom of information when he held a press conference in Sydney yesterday.

Without freedom of information, he said, there was unlikely to be accountable government and every likelihood of secret government — a breeding ground for inefficiency, unresponsiveness, shortsightedness and corruption.

Without access to information citizens could not deal with the vast expansion of government activity. "Information is the currency of democracy and without freedom of information there is unlikely to be accountable government," he told the audience at the Boulevard Hotel conference.

A freedom of information act did not guarantee good government but it decentralised power and opened the way to the exposure of scandals.

Mr Nader said that in the United States, which had the strongest freedom of information law in the world, tens of thousands of citizens could get personal files from various government agencies.

It was a constant battle but well worth the effort because people needed information to have a say in government decision-making.

Mr Nader told Australia to beware of multi-national corporations. Each nation State, he said, must make the world corporations accountable if they were to respect such things as health, safety and the use of the environment.

For more information about the Australian Freedom of Information Bill, see *Incite* no12, 18 July.

Democracy and justice

The reason that public interest movements are so termed is that they exist to put the views of unrepresented or under-represented sections of society to those in authority, in order to bring about a broader base for decision-making on matters which affect the public at large.

Underlying that objective, of course, lies a commitment to working for greater democracy and justice in Australian life and the belief that educating the public in how to participate in civic decision-making is a valuable way of strengthening the country's democratic base.

This means of course that the role of librarians and the work of Rupert, to some extent, overlap. Rupert is, in part, about helping people to get access to information in the possession of governments and private corporations which effect the health, safety and welfare of the public. The next stage is to show the public how to use the information, in other words how to affect the decision-making process to ensure that 'the system' adjusts to the needs and aspirations of the community.

Rupert recently organised a Freedom of Information Forum in conjunction with the ACT Branch of the Library Association of Australia. It was a very great success and Rupert hopes to co-operate with the LAA on other projects in the future.



A better-informed public

The increase in number and membership of voluntary community bodies in Australia at the present time testifies to the inability of traditional structures to recognise and adapt to the desires of a better-informed and educated public.

In many instances public and private sector agencies are either incapable of addressing some of our major social issues or ignorant of their existence — even when they may themselves be causing them!

Many community organisation are oriented to single or specific issues — environment protection, support of lone parents, legal rights, migrant groups. Unfortunately many of them have few enough resources to carry out their survival functions, let alone expand on any broad scale.

A national public interest movement cannot only pursue issues which its members determine to be of major importance, but by attracting specially skilled persons in a voluntary or paid capacity it can provide assistance to smaller organisations in the community, or to large organisations which need specialist assistance with lobbying or information.

The founding of Rupert

Rupert's history goes back to 1976 when John Wood founded Rupert Information and Referral Services. Through a newsletter, the service provided an information exchange for matter in the field of access to government and private sector administration and activities. The Public Interest Movement was founded in November 1979 in response to the

demands of RIRS members who wanted more than just a newsletter — a research and educational body, in fact.

Rupert concentrates on educating its members and the public so that they can participate more effectively in civic life, and in that way achieve greater accountability on the part of governments and the private sector. In practice this means Rupert shows individuals or small organisations how to undertake research, or compile information on issues that concern them, and then use their findings to bring about change.

It is a fact that most people do not know how to undertake research and feel daunted by the task. Consequently, if they wheel some proposal up to, say, Government with its massive research apparatus, they get bowled over by 'facts and figures'. The chances of special or public interest groups being effective is further inhibited by the commercial lobbying industry, employed mainly by rich and powerful groups, and knowing how to use the pressure points in government and the media to achieve their aims. But it is not necessary to be on the expense account lunch circuit and have full-coloured spirex-bound reports to change the minds of politicians and other executives.

Watchdog

Besides assisting with the organisation of the Nader visit Rupert is engaged in many activities associated with providing research and lobbying services to community groups.

There are a number of specific issues that are being handled, including Freedom of Information legislation, representation at broadcasting tribunal licence renewals, research of the effects of television on children and proposals for improving the quality of pharmaceutical products and the ethics and accountability of transnational drug companies.

One of the latest projects involves Rupert bear and Canberra's Monitor News Service



who have combined to form national *Watchdog* — a public interest review of federal politics. This is a fortnightly newsletter which covers federal politics on many specific and public interest issues. It is accompanied by an in-depth information monitoring service, a service of profiles on MP's performances on given or general issues, and a lobbying service for special interest groups without ready access to the Canberra political machine. Representatives from special interest groups can also intern under *Watchdog* lobbyists in Canberra. The service will be extended to state parliaments when resources permit.

The friendly bear has set out on a road to establishing Australia's first national public interest movement, in a country where huge sums of money are not available from private foundations, as in the US, but with a strong commitment that the need for 'public citizenry' is just as important.

If you are interested, want to help or know more, or become a subscriber for a humble \$15 a year, do contact Rupert at PO Box 346, ACT 2602.

Incite is printed in Australia by E. H. Enterprise Holdings, 28 Ewan Street, Mascot, for the publisher Library Association of Australia.

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