

point of view

ROLDO BARTIMOLE

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CITY CLUB FALLS PREY TO CIVIC ELITES

The City Club of Cleveland possibly should have a Friday Forum on the problems of the City Club.

It might make for a more intriguing afternoon than some of the present Friday Forums, which even some members describe as the low caliber of those of businessmen's luncheon talks.

The club certainly has ignored some of the major problems of the city over the last few years and hardly represents, as its reputation suggests, a place where alternative views are aired for the public.

The Club also has been having personnel and other problems since it kicked Alan Davis out as executive director and brought on Jim Foster.

Foster is described by one board member as "very conservative," even "right-wing." The naming of Foster suggest the City Club might be trying to follow the popularity of conservative thought these days. Foster is more a promoter than an advocate of free speech. His ascendancy appears reflective of this time of business dominance of civic, political and cultural life.

The club has always had its share of conservatives elites who have the need to dominate all opinion-making outlets. The founders of the City Club, wrote Tom Campbell in his 1963 history, "Freedom's Forum," felt that its members (some radical) "should not be in a position to alienate men of substance in the community."

You certainly don't find Friday Forum speakers today who would seriously offend "men (or women) of substance" in Cleveland today. One long-time member compares today's Friday Forums as not too dissimilar to those held "by Rotary or the Kiwanis."

What has some board members engaged in a behind-the-scenes rift has been an attempt by Foster to eliminate Davis' second in command, Lillian Anderson, associate director and a City Club employee of more than 22 years.

The attempt apparently was too clumsy to fully succeed. At a meeting March 27, Anderson was offered a compromise deal by which she will work out the year at full pay but actually work only a couple of days a week. Some had argued that she should at least be given a \$25,000 token buyout for her long service.

Some dissidents charged that Foster had treated Anderson shabbily, had eliminated her pension payment and cut her salary as messages for her to leave. Foster says all bonuses for pension payments were eliminated, including his, for financial reasons. He said salary was a private matter but the basis of her income had changed. Foster said discussing personnel issues was "inappropriate."

Anderson wasn't invited to express her views to the board or personnel committee, say members. She could not be reached for comment.

What makes the Anderson case more touchy for the City Club is that she is the only top executive who is black. The club has had trouble attracting black members in a city and area with a significant African-American population. She is also 62, a time when age discrimination becomes a potential problem.

But there are other serious problems facing the board, matters members would not like to see aired publicly, including charges by one board member of sexual "insensitivity," and "insulting remarks" made about

women board members at meetings; and charges of a "lack of vision and progress;" of fiscal policy problems; and "a demise of the club's popularity."

And, apparently, there are other personnel problems at the City Club.

Some concerned board members say that the small staff of four people has had six - not counting Anderson - employees leave under Foster's reign in the past year, indicating that new staff has left already after replacing old staff. Foster said that in each case the cause was due to an individual reason. He noted that one staff member had moved to Twinsburg and no longer wanted to make the trip to downtown Cleveland.

Others say four of the six were dumped. Anderson would have been, too, had not some board members balked. Foster was described by some employees as "abusive" and "arrogant," board members say. One former employee, hired by Foster and let go within six months, said there was "constant conflict." Although in an executive capacity, she said Foster treated her "like a child." She described Foster as "a petty nitpicker who always had to be right." She asked her name not be used since she had not found permanent employment since.

Membership is down, too.

The club has also lost some 150 members, more than a 10 per cent drop, from its membership of some 1,350, acknowledged Foster, who blamed the decline on natural cyclical adjustments. He said that the Club will start a membership drive in this month to gain some 200 new members.

A club publication shows the City Club lost \$23,000 in the year Foster ran the show, after making \$16,000 the previous year under Davis. And the club had the good fortune to have President Bill Clinton talk twice during the past year. That would appear a boost for membership since only members could attend such high-profile affairs.

Board member Brian Tucker, publisher and editorial director of Crain's Cleveland Business, was named as one of Foster's supporters, also didn't want to talk about personnel matters. He did say that Anderson has been a "tremendous asset" to the club for two decades. Others say though that he was unsupportive to her in meetings. He attributed the battling on the board to "creative friction." No wonder he writes those insipid editorials in Crain's.

Board member Dick Pogue, former managing partner of Jones, Day, Reavis and Pogue and now a public relations person for Dix & Eaton, also a Foster supporter, didn't return a call asking for his input on the City Club issue.

Somehow I can't recall Pogue's role as a defender of civil liberties that would earn him an appointed membership on the board of the City Club. Here's a guy who has dedicated his professional life here to engineering privately the public's business and steering its agenda to his and his friends liking.

Another appointed board member is William Silverman of Silverman & Co, public relations. Again one has to look in wonderment as to what anyone saw in Silverman as a protector of any portion of the First Amendment. Howard Landau, of Wyse-Landau, as a club past president makes a third corporate mouthpiece on the City's Club's board.

Doesn't it seem curious that three high-profile business public relations people - architects of spin - would be named to sit on the board of what's supposed to be a "citadel of free speech?" Their business - public relations - has about as much connection to free speech as a political commercial has to the truth.

It appears that City Club has strayed a long way from the theme of the preface written by Samuel Freedlander, in Campbell's biography of the club. Freedlander describes the City Club, founded in 1912, in his first paragraph:

"The strength of a democratic society is dependent upon its ability to get the citizens to participate in public dialogues concerning significant issues."

Under that banner, people like Dick Pogue would be a prime subject of debate, not the orchestrator of such probing of Cleveland today.

Even then, Campbell to mark the 50th anniversary of Cleveland's Club, wrote that "Few of the City Clubs that sprang up all over the country during the 'progressive era' survive today." It raises the question of a need for the club as it is today.

The City Club now faces a self-examination as a result of a letter from a relatively new board member, Roma Blunt, to Steven Smith, board president and dean of the Cleveland State Law School, and Foster, with copies distributed to all other board members.

The letter asked for a board meeting without former board presidents (Landau) or staff (Foster) to discuss serious problems of concern, she wrote.

Among Blunt's concerns are the "continuing insensitive and insulting remarks made to and about females (at) board meetings." (Women were not allowed to be members until 1972 when the rule was broken. Presidential candidate George McGovern's refusal to speak at the club during the presidential election because of the ban on women prompted a vote to allow women to be members).

Blunt also wanted examination of the "continuing decline of the Club's popularity and the inability of some of us to turn it around by involving more women and more minorities in meaningful roles."

She also listed, "The lack of vision and progress; limited access to information regarding - hiring, firing, layoffs, etc., in spite of the fact that as duly elected board members we are accountable for the actions and decision of the club; and the establishment of sound fiscal policies and procedures."

"I have hesitated to raise these issues, because I prefer being a party to the solution. rather than to be a party creating some additional problems," said Blunt in the letter.

She added that "Quite frankly, I have considered resigning from the board because I feel the 'board meetings' are exercises in futility. However, I was duly elected and feel that I have not yet done a good job of representing those people who voted for me."

Blunt refused to talk to me about the letter and said she was "disappointed" that someone had made it public by sending it to me.

But the letter's content reflects the problems at the City Club. Its standing as a free speech citadel are jeopardized by its reluctance to take on hard issues. It suffers the possibility of becoming, as one of its board members said, "another Rotary or Kiwanis club," with non-provoking speakers giving information that can be gotten from even television.

The City Club has tough competition these days so it cannot afford to be taken over by a clique of same-thinking, narrow-minded corporate types who don't want any waters muddied by those with different ideas or beliefs. Those in control of the City Club want their forum to be another cheerleader for the agenda elites are promoting today.

Possibly the biggest problem of the City Club today is that it has shifted distinctly to the business-dominated vogue. The City Club has lost, if it ever really had, its foundation - the tradition of being a citadel of free speech.

A good example of the club's fear of a voice that doesn't echo the status quo was last year's attempt to keep Dennis Kucinich from its microphone. The telephone campaign among members was blamed on Larry Robinson, Mayor Mike White's unpaid consultant, and then club president Landau. The Club tried to renege on an invitation to the former mayor, but finally went ahead with it.

The attempt reflected, as does the trend at the City Club, the corporate dominance. The club, via a grant by the Cleveland Foundation, funded a poll of corporate chief executives to find out their feelings about the City Club. Of course, they found the corporate elites saw the City Club as "too liberal." Attila the Hun would be too liberal to these folks.

Why on earth would an organization dedicated to free speech poll corporate bigwigs to find out what they thought of City Club? Why should anyone dedicated to free speech care what the hell they thought?

It's possible that the City Club has outlived its need and that those interested in free speech and public information should lend their efforts to helping to open the mass media in town to providing some balance of coverage to the mass audience.

The City Club can no longer be considered the city's club but a cozy Corporate Club.

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LANIGAN DEPRIVED OF COVETED AWARD BY FREE TIMES CENSOR

Each year at Academy Awards time I write a column for the Free Times giving appropriate acting awards to deserving members of the local scene.

This year one of the recipients was big mouth John Lanigan, who also writes something he calls a column for the Free Times. Lanigan's the typical talk show jock who's limited sense of humor leads him to make jokes about gays, about mentally deficient people and, of course, boobs and penises and things like that.

So I thought this was an appropriate award for Lanigan:

"John Lanigan for his faultless performance as only he could do it in "Can an asshole see his asshole if he bends over far enough?" John definitely puts his best face forward on this one."

But apparently managing editor Eric Broder, also a Free Times columnist, found this a bit too sensitive about a fellow columnist and took it out, the first time - and hopefully the last time - I have to endure censorship despite the light nature of the material. Broder said he thought it would get knocked out up the line so he performed a pre-censor bit of censorship.

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