

Interest Groups vs. Citizens



Imagine you are an oil company that has purchased drilling rights to certain land. You have complied with all the laws and regulations and understandably want to proceed with this potentially lucrative project. After all, it's the purpose of business to make a profit. Now imagine you are the parents of small children living near the land in question, and the project is a sour gas well. You are terrified and appalled.

The NFB documentary film *Worst Case Scenario* presents just this situation. In it the people of Rocky Mountain House are pitted against Shell Oil. The company plans to drill a sour gas well near the community, and ordinary people with families, jobs and lives to live have to spend all their spare time for years fighting it. The people must prove the well is potentially hazardous. The employees of Shell Oil try to get the project moving—a project that is entirely legal and within their rights to undertake. So here we have some Albertans fighting other Albertans as if each belonged to a foreign country—as if they were enemies. Where is our government in all this?

Free market libertarians tell us that the market—everyone acting in his own interest—will sort everything out. Marxists argue that the interests of workers and capitalists must inevitably conflict and perpetuate class war. If each group or individual is an isolated entity pursuing nothing more than his own selfish interest, we are not a society—we *are* warring factions. There's something wrong with a line of thinking that makes us enemies.

What brings us together? How are we united in purpose? Through our citizenship. Democratically elected governments should serve and protect the interests of all citizens. We are not

enemies. As citizens of the same country, we're all in this together. My welfare is tied up with the welfare of everyone in my society, my health with everyone's health. We share the water, the air and the land. If the drinking water is contaminated, all suffer. If the air we breathe is poisoned, we are all in serious trouble. When people act, not as oilmen or ranchers but as citizens, they are committed to the common good. People can act with disinterest—that is, not with only their own good in mind, but with a concern for what is right.

I was sure 20 years ago that the meaning of the word “disinterested” had disappeared from the English language. My students thought it meant “bored.” In a time when lobbyists and interest groups exercise an overwhelming influence on government, it might be good to resuscitate the noble concept of disinterest. *Politicians are supposed to act with disinterest.* Government represents the interests of all the people. It is supposed to develop policies and enact laws for the good of the people as a whole.

So when the people of Rocky Mountain House and Shell Oil are at each other's throats, where is the government?

And what do we citizens of Alberta have to say to our government? “Government is the only organized mechanism that makes possible that level of shared disinterest known as the public good,” says John Ralston Saul. The citizen is the source of the legitimacy of the state. But our rights are protected only to the extent that we participate in society. Let's not fight each other. Let us act as citizens and require our government to enact regulations for the good of all.

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