

FACE TO FACE

Meet Art Silverman

A civil service moralist finds a place in the lobbying industry

by Gord McIntosh

The cafe is a popular Saturday morning breakfast spot for Ottawa's young and upwardly mobile. The conversation is filled with shoptalk about who's advancing where and how.

So it was easy to spot Art Silverman, CGA, civil servant turned lobbyist, for the first time. He's the one with the knowing look on his face amid all the career chatter. And, he turns out to be a cagey interview, asking as many questions as he's answering.

It's not that he doesn't have something to say. It's just that the private sector has not worn off the civil servant's reluctance to be quoted freely. In addition, a 24-year career in the public service has taught him to say nothing when words can't improve on silence.

Although it's been four years now since he has been Assistant Deputy Minister of procurement at Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC), he's still making his presence felt at the former department. Silverman, 54, is now part of the leading public affairs firm, Association House. He wouldn't think of discussing his clients, but he is reputed to be the brains behind three recent cases before the Canadian International Trade Tribunal – one involving Corel Corp. and two involving Novell Canada – that will change the way Ottawa treats its suppliers.

The three cases are being held up as watershed examples of government suppliers demanding to be treated evenly by federal departments, even though many of those citing the cases may never have heard of Arthur Silverman.

Over at the House of Commons, for example, maintenance workers use clear garbage bags that are very much a legacy of Silverman.

In 1980, he was appointed Administrator of the House of Commons by then Speaker, Jeanne Sauve. Back then, Parliament Hill was widely known as a corrupt precinct for everything from kickbacks to pilfering from the Parliamentary Restaurant (hence the clear garbage bags). It was Silverman's job to clean it up. He did.

Author Stevie Cameron documented Silverman's five years as Commons Administrator in her book, *Ottawa Inside Out*. She remembers him as a tireless crusader against inbred corruption, favouritism and largesse.

Geoff Norquay, now an Ottawa lobbyist, was running the Opposition Conservative caucus in those days and made it a point to get to know Silverman, even though that was probably not a smart thing to do. Many of Norquay's employers, notably former MP Bob Coates, campaigned publicly for Silverman's firing because of his determination to clean the place up. "He really was the new broom," says Norquay. "Woe betide anybody he catches playing with the process."

Adds Cameron, "He would chase somebody down to the end of the earth if he thought they were corrupt and crooked."

Indeed, of the many departments most recently to feel Silverman's influence, PWGSC and Human Resources Development Canada owe their existence to him. For example, he headed the Privy Council Office (PCO) Implementation Team that oversaw implementation of the government reorganization in 1993 that resulted in the departments of Supply and Services and Public Works being folded together. Silverman's assignment at PCO was earned, in part, because of his hard driving, no nonsense style.

On his retirement from the public service, he joined Association House, a loose partnership of self-employed consultants who share expenses and refer each other business. From Association House, Silverman assists private sector suppliers and those involved in the regulatory process deal with the government's complicated processes, conflicting objectives and hidden mazes.

The firm is run by Jamie Deacey, who hand picks all Association House members. He jumped at the chance to get Silverman on board.

To Deacey, Ottawa is the town of the two Ps – politics and process. Lots of people understand the political world but few truly understand the process.

"Arthur understands the process part better than anyone else," says Deacey. "He knows intimately where each nut, cog and wheel is in the public service and how they're supposed to interact with each other. And in many cases he's written the manual."

In a town obsessed with Rhodes scholarships and Trinity College, Silverman's 24 years in the public service – a secondment to the Privy Council, three stints as Assistant Deputy Minister – are all the more remarkable for a "lowly accountant" without so much as a graduate degree. Inside the bureaucracy, he is widely believed to be the greatest deputy minister this town never had.

"He has excellent institutional memory; he is the I.F. Stone of Ottawa," says Cameron, referring to the legendary American journalist who understood the inner workings of Washington better than anyone else in the 1960s. "I think it was a shame he was never a deputy minister."

Norquay, Cameron and Deacey all agree the public service's loss is the gain of the private sector, particularly government suppliers and those involved in the regulatory process. Norquay says, "If he were on my team, he would be a significant force in keeping the other team honest because of his superior knowledge of process, openness, transparency and honesty and all those things that government must obey."

Deacey thinks Silverman is the most honest man in Ottawa and tells an anecdote to prove it. It deals with the morning three years ago when Silverman started work at Association House. He walked in with his arms loaded with plastic shopping bags. Next morning same thing. By the third morning "it begins to register on me," says Deacey. "I said, 'Arthur, just a wild guess, but you gave your Government of Canada briefcase back to them when you left, didn't you?' He said, 'Of course.' "

"Of course Arthur gave it back. It wasn't his. I don't know anybody who has given back their briefcase." On his fourth morning Silverman was presented with a new briefcase, courtesy of Association House.

A lot of government suppliers are already hoping that his private-sector briefcase will see just as much service as his government one did.

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