John Radcliffe
POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Feb 08, 2013

The veteran lobbyist relies on honesty as his best way to win hearts and minds

By Lee Catterall

As much a fixture in the state Capitol as the most senior representative or senator is John Radcliffe, who can be seen entering committee room after committee room to urge legislation on behalf of his numerous clients.

"We represent across the board," said Radcliffe, best known for arguing for legalized commercial gambling in Hawaii, on behalf of a Michigan public relations firm that represents a casino owner.

Radcliffe says his clients also include the University of Hawaii's faculty union, AT&T, the telecommunications industry, the securities industry, retailers, wholesalers and real estate interests -- "virtually every sector of the economy."

Radcliffe arrived in Hawaii in 1975 as executive director of the Hawaii State Teachers Association, after being an organizer for HSTA's parent labor union, the National Education Association, in Indiana, Illinois, Tennessee and Virginia.

He stepped down to run for Congress in 1988 but lost the Democratic primary to former Voice of America director Mary Bitterman.

Left with no job or income back then, Radcliffe said, people began coming to him to say, "Could you help me with this or that problem?' and I answered in the affirmative as often as I could." Thus was born John Radcliffe the lobbyist.

QUESTION: You've been a lobbyist in Hawaii for more than 20 years. What's the reaction of lawmakers when they see you coming?

ANSWER: Some of the newest ones or who were elected this year may not even know me, but those who have been around for a long time do know me, and I get along with everybody and I think everybody gets along with me. It's very nice.

Q: What's your strategy as you prepare for the Legislature's opening each year, and what's the pace as the 60-day session unfolds?

A: The strategy depends on the client and on the issue. The pace is incredibly fast and gets faster. It's a marathon business. In other words, it's not over until it's over, and then it might not be over. It's a long process and it's very much like, if you watch pro basketball, with the intensity and the speed often gets faster with each quarter, and the last part of the session itself is a blinding and very intense operation. ... It's great. If you're into the actual spirit of it, it's exhilarating.

Q: What's been one of your most memorable lobbying efforts -- perhaps because of the difficulty of the effort or the surprising way things turned out?

A: There were things that I did years ago that were terrific. For example, getting to allow people who were in the employee retirement system to borrow money to buy the fee on their houses. Remember back when a lot of houses used to be leasehold? And then they entered various trusts and so forth, they had to sell the fee, and teachers and
public employees couldn't afford to buy the fee. So I was able to get legislation passed which allowed them to borrow money from the retirement system, which was great! (Laughs) Great!

Q: What do you find has been the most helpful quality that helps "sell" a cause or position?

A: Honesty is paramount in this business. If you shave the truth or lie, or tell people something that isn't true, you're just flat-out done in this business. That's the end of it.

Q: How many clients do you have now, and how many bills will you be following on their behalf?

A: It varies -- between 20 and 30 clients at any given time, and I'm not alone. I have an office and a staff and a partner, and I have my own clients as well. We read every bill, all 3,000 bills. Hawaii is one legislature that puts in more bills than virtually any other in the country. Our legislators average 40 a year, times 76 (legislators). That's a lot of bills. If, by comparison, Congress did that, there'd be something like 22,000 bills offered every year. It's a lot of bills, locally about 3,000. We read them all, and then we put them in categories by whichever client is interested in those bills, and then we follow those bills.

Q: In serving as a member of Gov. Abercrombie's transition team, helping him decide his Cabinet choices, did you serve your clients?

A: No. I think the interest of the government comes first. There are any number of people that you will find in government who are very pro-this or anti-that but they're all top-notch people. If I had anything to do about putting those people in there, I did my job, and I've never seen my life to be one in which I put the interests of this or that before the interests of the people. Hopefully, they'll coincide but when they don't, I've got a problem.

Q: How did you come to lobby for Marketing Resources Group of Lansing, Mich., which is a public relations firm with a casino operator in Michigan as a client? Is it still a client of yours, and do you have similar clients interested in legalizing gambling?

A: It's still a client, just that one. There've been a lot of years when I haven't gotten paid, because there wasn't that much interest in gaming in Hawaii. Then there have been years when there was more, when I sometimes was paid. There's a lot of interest now, and in the past several years.

Q: Why do you think it is that Hawaii and Utah are the only states that ban organized gambling?

A: Utah does it because it's a practicing theocracy. Utah does it because it's a bastion of Mormonism. Utah is surrounded by five states, all of whom have casino gaming. Hawaii doesn't have gaming for a couple of reasons. The most prominent, however, is that we have gaming in Nevada, and the folks in Nevada are very good at keeping gaming out of Hawaii. In fact, your newspaper is a prime group that benefits from that. You guys get ads every week or every two weeks, front page stuff about, you know, "Go to Las Vegas." That's all paid by the Nevada people, so we are strongly invested here in spending after-tax money in Nevada.

Q: What makes you think Hawaii will approve gambling at some point?

A: Because we have kind of an iron triangle of problems in the state. We want to do things. We want to protect our forests. We want to protect and grow our harbors. We want to fix our roads. We want to improve our schools. We want to make sure that we've got housing. We want to make sure that we've got things for older people, etc., etc. Down the line, every step of the way, that costs money, and government costs money, and the cost of government is going up. So we can raise taxes; that's one way to get the money to do what we need to do. We can decrease the benefits now paid to public employees, which is now, retirement alone, a billion a year. Health is now a billion a year, and that's growing exponentially. Or we can find new sources of revenue. If we don't find new sources of revenue, then the other two are the only ones left.

Q: What about a lottery?

A: Lottery is an interesting device. These are all entertainment devices. It's a nice entertainment device. It would be
OK and we'd be great, but it doesn't raise any money. ... I've never opposed a lottery and wouldn't be opposed to a lottery if we had one. The issue of the lottery is it hires about six people; it takes about half a dozen people to run a state lottery. A casino takes about 3,000 people to run that casino. That's a big deal and it's a lot of employment for the state of Hawaii and for the people. A lot of taxes get paid.

Q: You also represented the Tobacco Institute, which many people regard as bad guys.

A: I represented the Tobacco Institute when it was alive, I represented R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., I've represented them for 20-some years and I still represent them today. And again, that's a tax issue primarily. Smoking is a dying thing in more ways than one. In the United States, as an industry, use will probably be modified and I wouldn't doubt that in the future Hawaii becomes more like Sweden, when it comes to tobacco use, which is not smoking but uses nicotine in other ways.

Q: Gov. Abercrombie wants to bring inmates back to Hawaii from Arizona facilities run by one of your clients, Corrections Corp. of America. What arguments do you have to make on its behalf?

A: First of all, it is much more cost-effective. It costs $63 a day to house a prisoner; that's $22,990 or thereabouts a year. That's what it costs to house one prisoner. It's a state-of-the-art prison that was made for Hawaii's prisoners, only Hawaii prisoners in that institution, and it practices all Hawaiian activities as well as others, all kinds of educational activities and training activities that you will find that inmates who are there actually like it there and want to stay ... some of them don't want to be in prison at all. It is cheaper there and actually the outcomes are excellent.

What I find interesting is that so few people have actually visited that prison. ... As far as you know, it's a hole in the desert. You have no idea what you're looking at, so any amount of fantasy can come to mind.

Chances still slim that Hawaii will get gambling

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