

Consumer movement at a crossroads

It took Joan Claybrook to put air bags in cars. But she's leaving Public Citizen and the era of 'rock star' advocacy is over. It's up to consumers to revitalize grass-roots product-safety activism.

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Since 1989, all new cars sold in the United States have had an air bag on the driver's side. It's estimated they save almost 3,000 lives a year.

The woman largely responsible for that is Joan Claybrook, who announced last week that she's stepping down as president of [Public Citizen](#) after 27 years at the helm of the consumer watchdog group founded by Ralph Nader.

Claybrook, 71, who served as head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration under President Carter, told me she'd been thinking about leaving for the last few years. But she said she was unwilling to walk away while President Bush remained in power.

"The Bush years have been very, very tough for consumer rights," Claybrook said. "Finally, it feels like we have some breathing room."

The consumer movement is at a crossroads. After becoming a force in the 1960s with Nader's rise to prominence, it has since struggled to connect with the media and public.

"In many ways, there's less of a movement now," Claybrook acknowledged. "Now there are specific advocates for specific issues."

"Consumers still have power, but it's dispersed. When Ralph started his work, there wasn't really a consumer movement. It was just Ralph. Now there are a number of groups, but it's not centralized."

When I relayed Claybrook's comments to Nader, he was more pessimistic.

"We used to put out press releases and they'd be on the evening news," he said. "Now you can't even get them on cable."

Nader's consumer advocacy, of course, has been overshadowed by his political ambitions (for which he still has a lot to answer, if you ask me). But he makes a good point.

There's so much clutter in the media marketplace, so much noise from competing interests that it's increasingly difficult for a nonprofit group to get its message across, much less stir up sufficient outrage to catalyze political action.

"The indications are very bad," Nader, 74, said of the future. "We all thought the Internet would give us a resurgence. The big hope was that you could band people together quickly and cheaply, but it hasn't worked out."

At least Claybrook, who will end her duties at Public Citizen in January, prepares to depart with her head high.

Aside from air bags, other achievements in which Public Citizen played a key role include changes to congressional ethics and lobbying rules, campaign finance reform and the filing of hundreds of lawsuits to hold companies more accountable for their products and services.

"Joan Claybrook is the dean of consumer advocates," said Ed Mierzewski, consumer program director for the [U.S. Public Interest Research Group](#), another organization founded by Nader and for which Claybrook once worked. "She has a long record of victories."

Because of her background at NHTSA, auto safety has always been Claybrook's pet cause.

"The auto industry calls me the Dragon Lady because they dislike me so intensely," she said, laughing. "I've fought them every step of the way" on matters of safety and fuel efficiency.

A spokesman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, a leading industry trade group, declined to comment.

One reason Claybrook said she's so pleased with the air bag requirement is because the technology can only be tested effectively by crash testing cars.

"Every time you do that," she said, "it can show all sorts of structural defects. So air bags make cars safer in lots of different ways."

Despite her adversarial relationship with Detroit, Claybrook said she supports a bailout of the Big Three -- but only with strict requirements for fuel efficiency.

"It was partly because of fuel economy that they got into trouble in the first place," she said. "They've been designing vehicles that no one wants."

There's a certain weariness that comes across in speaking with the consumer movement's elders.

"I'm ready for something new," Claybrook said. "I've been carrying the administrative and fundraising load for a long time."

No successor at Public Citizen has been named.

For his part, Nader makes no effort to hide his frustration. "It's been very difficult holding back the hordes of corporatism," he said. "It's become more defensive than offensive, just trying to save what's been achieved."

They aren't easy acts to follow. "Nobody will ever be a rock star again like Ralph Nader," said U.S. PIRG's Mierzwinski, 55.

If the consumer movement is going to have a future, it will have to return to its roots -- galvanizing public opinion and stirring up the outrage needed to catalyze political action.

Ultimately, it's up to us -- consumers -- to demand accountability for unsafe products and stronger regulation of businesses, and to remain engaged with the legislative process.

The Internet has yet to live up to its potential as an engine for consumer protection, but it still can.

Check out the sites of some of the leading advocacy groups. If possible, donate some money, or just sign up for a newsletter.

This movement was always about one thing -- you. Isn't that worth fighting for?

David Lazarus' column runs Wednesdays and Sundays. Send your tips or feedback to david.lazarus@latimes.com.