Between Eminence & Notoriety
FOUR DECADES OF RADICAL URBAN PLANNING
Chester Hartman

CENTER FOR URBAN POLICY RESEARCH
EDWARD J. BLOUSTEIN SCHOOL OF PLANNING AND PUBLIC POLICY
RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY
NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY
For years now, Harvard has been running elections for its Board of Overseers, ostensibly to give its graduates a say in the governing of the university. When a group of Harvard and Radcliffe alumni/ae entered the election process in 1985 in an effort to persuade the university to sell its large investments in companies doing business in apartheid South Africa, Harvard reacted first by trying to corrupt the election process; then by launching a series of scurrilous attacks on the men and women who put themselves forward as candidates or worked to get the pro-divestment candidates elected; and finally, by rewriting the election rules to tilt the playing field so steeply that it will take mountain-climbing gear to keep future pro-divestment candidates in contention.

The Board of Overseers, while historically and technically able to exert real power at Harvard, in recent decades has ceded this role to the seven-person Corporation (a.k.a. The President and Fellows—a literal term until early 1989, as before then no woman ever had served on that body).

Each year a committee of the Harvard Alumni Association—HAA (to which all alumni/ae automatically belong)—has nominated ten persons to fill the five newly vacant positions for six-year terms on the thirty-person Board. All degree holders, with the exception of Harvard faculty and administrators, are eligible to vote. Although there are roughly 170,000 eligible voters, less than one-quarter actually bother to mail in their ballots.

Nomination and election to the Board of Overseers has traditionally signified a type of patronage—for loyal service to the Alumni Association or Harvard Clubs, largesse, or anticipated largesse. Nominees are usually corporate executives, lawyers, and the like, with an occasional judge, university president, or foundation executive thrown in. The Board's decision-making activities have been virtually nil, its principal function resting on the various visiting committees to departments and other units of the university.

In 1985–86, three West Coast alumni/ae—John Plotz, a deputy public defender in San Francisco; Gay Seidman, a University of California graduate student in sociology and the first woman president of the Crimson;
and Kenneth Simmons, a black architecture professor at the University of California—Berkeley—decided to take advantage of the rarely used nomination-by-petition route, in order to focus attention on Harvard's continuing unwillingness to divest its huge investment portfolio of South Africa-related stocks. Along with a few friends and helpers, and calling themselves Alumni Against Apartheid, they mounted a respectable campaign. Speaking to specific issues of controversy and actually running a campaign—virtually unheard of—they were severely criticized by the powers-that-be for "politicizing" the process. Up to that point, elections were extraordinarily dull affairs, and voters made their choices based on each candidate's brief biographical sketch and statement that accompanied the ballot. Typical were such snoozers as, "To maintain Harvard's preeminence in today's rapidly changing world will require the continuing support of one of Harvard's greatest assets, its alumni/ae."

The reaction of Harvard's administration to what it clearly construed as an act of _lese majesté_ was dramatic and panicky. Apparently shaken by the prospect of free spirits on a board of loyal drones, President Derek Bok ghostwrote a letter over the signature of Board Chair Joan Bok (a fact he later admitted, after earlier denying his role), urging Harvard grads to vote for the official HAA candidates; this letter was included as part of the ballot packet, along with a highly misleading and one-sided "fact sheet" on the university's position on divestment. This bit of electioneering—roughly equivalent to the election commission printing a political message on the official ballots—produced a flood of outraged letters to the alumni magazine and strong condemnatory editorials in the _Crimson_ and _Boston Globe_ ("ham-fisted," as the _Globe_ described the tactic), which called for a second, compensatory mailing and a guarantee of impartiality in vote-counting. Embarrassed, the university agreed to turn the vote count over to an "independent body"—and then chose its own accounting firm.

Somewhat surprisingly, pro-divestment candidate Seidman won, giving impetus to a far more organized effort in the following year. In 1986–87, an expanded organization, renamed Harvard-Radcliffe Alumni/ae Against Apartheid (HRAAA), fielded a full slate of candidates (six in all, since one extra seat had fallen vacant due to a resignation). This time, two pro-divestment candidates were elected: Consuela Washington, a black Harvard Law School graduate who is counsel to the House Energy and Commerce Committee, and Peter Wood, a Duke history professor who led the successful divestment fight there.

Seidman, Washington, and Wood have not had an easy time of it. They are not members of The Club and are made to know it ("Board Shuns Dissenters" was the headline of an April 27–28, 1989, two-part _Crimson_ series on the university's governing boards). The HRAAA-backed candidates "have been the targets of vitriolic personal attacks by Board members who question their commitment to Harvard"; they are excluded from key committees, committee leadership and the Board's powerful executive committee; and the HRAAA types tend not to have the business, professional, and social contacts with the "in" members at the clubs and boardrooms where a good deal of informal interaction goes on. Gay Seidman remarked, "When I first started, I tried hard to be the perfect Overseer and do all the right things, but there's a point when I just got to feel so alienated by constant little things that happened that it didn't matter what I did. I was going to be marginalized." Peter Wood observed, "I've been struck by how many cards they've found to play."

Let's look more closely at those cards. Wood, a masterfully diplomatic, nonconfrontational type, had assembled and distributed to his fellow Board members ma-
aterials supporting the divestment position, and received agreement to calendar a discussion and vote on the issue. The university thereupon sent Vice-President and General Counsel Daniel Steiner and Overseers/Corporation Secretary Robert Shenton on a flying trip around the country to lobby individual Overseers against bringing the issue to a vote. That successful round of visits produced a “compromise”—a joint Corporation/Overseers committee to look into Harvard’s policy of “selective divestment” and report back to both bodies. None of the HRAAA-backed Overseers was appointed to the committee. Not surprisingly, the stacked body recommended no more than cosmetic changes in the existing policy.

The HRAAA-backed Overseers clearly had an impact on the university, beyond producing panic. They have moved some of the other Overseers to a pro-divestment position. And, in classic political fashion, the official slate has begun to include some more liberal types, in a clear effort to take away some of HRAAA’s appeal. Thus, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Frances FitzGerald, Senator Albert Gore, Jr., and Iran-Contraagate Counsel Arthur Liman have been among the recent official nominees—and FitzGerald announced her support for divestment shortly after being nominated.

Meanwhile, Harvard, clearly shaken by the success of HRAAA, seems to have decided that it was time to tilt the playing field. Its vehicle was a committee headed by Federal Judge William Young that had been established in late 1985 to reexamine the procedures for electing Overseers. In September 1988 (ironically, after a year in which HRAAA was unable to elect any of its candidates), the Young Committee produced the fruit of its efforts.

A simple listing of its recommendations shows the extent to which Harvard was willing to go to rid itself of this threat to its hegemony:

- Tripling the number of signatures required for petition candidacies.
- Requiring all petition candidates to be listed separately at the bottom of the ballot and clearly identified as such.
- Stating that ballots with fewer than four votes cast would be thrown out (in order to discourage “bullet voting”).
- Preparation of a statement from the Alumni Association explaining why the official candidates have been nominated and why they fit Harvard’s needs—i.e., institutionalizing the Joan/Derek Bok letter.
- Reducing from ten to eight the number of nominees for the five seats. By reducing by 20 percent the number of official nominees, the Alumni Association stands to increase by 25 percent the average vote for its remaining candidates, thereby making it very much more difficult for petition candidates to be elected, while simultaneously reducing the degree of choice offered to the voters. The official explanation in the Young Committee report was that it is too difficult to locate ten good candidates each year from Harvard’s 170,000 graduates.
- Finally, the report proposed that, for cost reasons, the counting of the ballots be returned to the Harvard Alumni Records Office.

At around this time, HRAAA announced its 1988–89 slate, headed by one of Harvard’s most distinguished honorary degree recipients, Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. In the spring of 1988, Tutu had stated his intention to return his honorary degree unless Harvard divested entirely within a year.
Clearly threatened by the Tutu nomination, the Harvard administration was somewhat uncertain how to respond. Unwilling to attack Tutu publicly, President Bok and his aides ceded leadership to Charles Egan, incoming president of the HAA and outgoing chair of its Overseers Nominating Committee, and John Reardon, associate vice president for university relations and HAA’s new executive director.

Egan and Reardon fashioned a curious attack on HRAAA, the gravamen of which was a pair of contradictory theses. The HRAAA candidates, they charged, were “single-issue candidates” who cared only about divestment, rather than the full range of issues facing Harvard—this was an echo of the Joan/Derek Bok letter of three years earlier, and, incompatibly, that HRAAA was not really interested in divestment, but instead had an “agenda” of issues, principal among which was an assault on the governance of Harvard. In a letter to Harvard permanent class secretaries, Egan said that in his judgment, and that of the Harvard administration, the election of Archbishop Tutu and the other petition candidates may “play havoc with the administration of Harvard.”

Hampered by Tutu’s unassailable moral authority (a quality which one might have hoped would lead Harvard to welcome him onto the Board), Egan decided to focus his attack on HRAAA’s then executive director, University of Massachusetts Philosophy Professor Robert Paul Wolff. Quite bizarrely, Egan asserted that the real issue in Overseers elections was not divestment but “an attempt by Wolff to advance his own political views. ‘Wolff is doing what Joseph McCarthy did, he is creating a banner under which he can float his own social agenda. He is exploiting Bishop Tutu to achieve his own ends.’”

Egan went on to label HRAAA’s unsuccessful 1988 candidates “second-rate.” Reardon, less restrained than his colleague, couldn’t contain himself at the news of Tutu’s nomination. “What’s to keep [HRAAA] from nominating Fidel Castro next time?” he asked in response to a question at a February 1989 HAA meeting. And then Egan, vice president of Hallmark Cards, plunked down $9,500 of his own money to pay for a full-page “Open Letter,” printed on the inside back cover of the May–June issue of Harvard Magazine arriving in alumni mailboxes just as they were casting their ballots, signed by Stanford University President and Harvard alumnus Donald Kennedy, a close friend of President Bok. Kennedy’s ad urged fellow alums to support the official slate of nominees and vote against “single-issue candidates” (an obvious canard, as evidenced by a reading of the statements of the HRAAA-backed candidates, which spoke to over a dozen concerns and issues besides divestment, including equal admission of women and men, expanding relations between Harvard and third-world learning institutions, enhancement of academic excellence and freedom, and a stronger commitment to training and hiring women and minority scholars). The May 3, 1989, Crimson reported that the Bok–Kennedy–Egan deal had been brokered by the university’s vice president for alumni affairs, Fred Glimp.

Archbishop Tutu won, bringing the number of HRAAA-backed Overseers to four. The day before the 1989 election results were announced, the Board of Overseers passed a slightly truncated version of the Young Report (“I think it was not a good spring for democracy,” observed Peter Wood). A key Alumni Association figure lobbied Board members by phone. For the first time in memory, Harvard Magazine, the somewhat independent alumni organ, published an editorial in its May–June 1989 issue, entitled “The Overseers’ Election.” It criticized the university’s move on the election process as follows:
[S]uch measures [the Young Committee Report recommendations] . . . will be seen by many as tactical moves to give the university a more direct part in managing the Overseers' election and to strengthen official slates at the expense of independent candidates and the groups backing them. This impression will not help Harvard. . . . Does Harvard need the kind of partisan feuding that has vexed Princeton and Dartmouth alumni in recent years? . . . The HAA directors should . . . do all they can to see that the Board of Overseers is a broadly representative body, reflecting all shades of opinion on university policy.

The implications of the adopted changes are clear. A quick arithmetic calculation shows that had Harvard nominated only eight candidates in 1988–89 rather than ten, Tutu likely would have been dropped from fourth to seventh, and thus would not have been elected.

Three lessons may be learned from this story:

First, when playing ball against someone who owns the ball, the bat, and the playing field, and who also keeps the score and calls the balls and strikes, it's a trifle hard to win the game.

Second, the Harvard administration reacts paranolically to even the slightest challenge to its absolute control over all processes of governance and decision. Derek Bok and company simply cannot tolerate even the simulacrum of genuine disagreement.

Third, the vital center of the Harvard alumni/aee—led by classes from the late 1960s and early 1970s—is shifting politically to the left. If Harvard persists in adopting an intransigent, red-baiting stance in the face of challenges such as that brought by HRAAA, it may find itself fatally out of touch with its own graduates.

[Note: Not surprisingly, Harvard never did divest from South Africa. But following that country's transition to democracy—which