

# Influencers



Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

## ADVOCACY GROUPS

### A Thorn With a Smile

Most dinners benefiting Washington think tanks feel staid compared with the Competitive Enterprise Institute's annual gala. The libertarian group might treat its supporters to e-cigarettes, free rides on Uber or T-shirts that sport the message, "Rachel was wrong," deriding the famed conservationist, Rachel Carson.

"This is a place where people have fun," says the group's new president, Kent Lassman, who joined April 6 from the public relations outfit DCI Group.

The institute, which has been around for more than three decades and operates on a \$7 million annual budget, does a lot more than put on its annual

dinner, though the shindig has helped CEI cultivate its brand as a hub for free-market policy and advocacy. Steering it is now Lassman's job.

The group is often a lightning rod. This month, U.S. Virgin Islands Attorney General Claude E. Walker, who is trying to raise awareness of the dangers of climate change, subpoenaed documents from CEI, which argues that, even if climate change exists, it might not be a bad thing.

CEI is not intimidated and says it won't comply with the subpoena. "We understand our core principles," Lassman, 41, says, ticking off such mantras as individual liberty and economic growth. "We will meet those

challenges like so much of what we do in life, with candor about what we stand for" and, he adds, "a measure of steel in the spine."

In 2013, Google's sponsorship of the lavish after-party at the CEI dinner prompted an uproar from the search engine firm's environmentalist employees. It hasn't been a sponsor since.

CEI still has Google's back, though, when it comes to the possibility of an antitrust suit against the tech giant, which the Federal Trade Commission was contemplating at one time.

"Big centralized agencies are not the types of tools we need for the future," Lassman says. Oftentimes, "there is a market solution that is superior" to a

government one.

The dinner regularly draws Republican speakers eager to curry favor with libertarians, including most recently Carly Fiorina and, in 2013, Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky. CEI employees also produce a slick video each year in which they lampoon environmentalists and regulators.

Lassman is steeped in libertarian politics, having served as a vice president for strategy with FreedomWorks and as policy director at Citizens for a Sound Economy Foundation.

He takes over for Lawson Bader, who served as president for three years after Fred Smith, CEI's founder, stepped down. Smith is still involved with the group. Bader, who wore a kilt to the dinner, is now president of the Donors Capital Fund.

— Kate Ackley