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Venturing an Opinion

VOLTAIRE, FRANCE'S GIFT TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT, is popularly credited with the quote "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." A little bit of research quickly proves that he never actually wrote or spoke the words. But if he didn't, he should have. Not only because it's a good line that meshes with his egalitarian philosophy but also because it captures the spirit of democracy and individual freedom that he helped to inspire and on which the fledgling American and French republics were founded.

There isn't a child born in the past century in America who doesn't believe in his or her inalienable right to free speech (ask any parent). But have we done such a good job in encouraging our citizens to participate in the political process, not just by voting but also by speaking up when they have expertise or opinion that can inform public policy?

At its annual meeting last October, the Academy's Board of Directors signed off on a new strategic plan that, among many other things, asserts the actuarial profession's obligation to publicly articulate the implications of actuarial policy decisions affecting the American public. (To read the new plan in its entirety, go to www.actuary.org/pdf/academy/strategic07.pdf)

For some actuaries, comfortable with the Academy's traditional role of offering impartial, nonpartisan advice from the sidelines, this more public posture carries with it the fear that outright lobbying is just a short, quick slide down the slope.

Anticipating those concerns, Academy President Bill Bluhm, who directed the creation of the new strategic plan during his year as the Academy's president-elect, urged annual meeting attendees, "Let's not let being careful trump our obligation to our mission to serve the public."

Regardless of how you feel about the Academy's new stance on public issues—and it's a topic that continues to be hotly debated—there's another aspect that the Academy



leadership wants you to take equally seriously. And this one doesn't require a sea change in member opinion since it's always been encouraged of Academy members: to individually take positions on matters of public interest where your actuarial knowledge and skills can help lead to more informed and prudent policy.

That is exactly what Mark Shemtob and an ad hoc group calling itself Concerned Actuaries do in this issue of *Contingencies*. They are concerned, respectively, about retirement policy in this country and the future of Medicare—issues that promise to feature prominently in this election year and on which actuarial expertise is not only wanted but sorely needed.

You may not agree with their assessment of the issues, much less their suggested solutions, but you have to applaud them for caring enough to put their thoughts out there.

The next part is up to you. If you disagree, please write. If you agree, please write. Join the discussion in this bazaar of actuarial and public policy ideas that is *Contingencies*.

Do it because informed discussion is the only way that the profession, and this country, is going to move forward on some tangled and thorny issues.

Do it because it's your civic duty.

Do it because you can.

Linda Mallon