

LITTLE BIG MAN

Texans for Public Justice is a watchdog group to watch.

TOM CRADDICK HAD better watch his back. The Republican speaker of the Texas House of Representatives is the target of a complaint filed in February by watchdog group Texans for Public Justice (TPJ). The organization says that Craddick illegally funneled campaign contributions to three Democratic candidates in return for their support for him as speaker.

One might think that Craddick (who denies the allegations) would see the complaint as a gnat, easily swatted away. After all, TPJ is only a five-person organization with a \$300,000 budget. But the group has built a record that should strike fear in even the most powerful legislator. Just ask Tom DeLay, at one time the all-powerful majority whip of the U.S. House of Representatives.

The group filed the complaint that charged DeLay's PAC, Texans for a Republican Majority, with funneling corporate money into political activity, leading to DeLay's criminal indictment for conspiracy in 2005. There is no certain date for DeLay's trial.

TPJ is "unique around the country," says Joanne Doroshov, the executive director of the Center for Justice & Democracy in New York who is also on TPJ's Board. "They're effective at exposing conflicts and corruption at the state level that no one else is taking a look at."

In the last few months, the group has denounced a plea deal between the U.S. Department of Justice and BP p.l.c. over a deadly explosion at its Texas City refinery and issued two reports about political spending. The goal, says director Craig McDonald, is to monitor and provide information on



how money flows and lobbying works in Texas.

TPJ has met with its fair share of opposition, including a 2005 audit by the Internal Revenue Service. "People were pissed off about the work they were doing against DeLay," says the group's lawyer, John Pomeranz of Harmon, Curran, Spielberg & Eisenberg in Washington, D.C. The group traced the initial complaint to the IRS back to a Maryland attorney with ties to DeLay, but

that lawyer maintains that he was not acting for the former congressman. The IRS cleared TPJ.

Nor will TPJ be receiving any bouquets from Texans for Lawsuit Reform, an influential tort reform group, which maintains that TPJ is just a thinly veiled front for the plaintiffs' bar. "They have never seen a lawsuit they didn't like or a plaintiffs lawyer that did anything wrong," says Hugh Rice Kelly, general counsel of TLR. "They publish polemics and propaganda."

McDonald shrugs off the criticism. He notes that TPJ doesn't lobby and tracks money donated by plaintiffs lawyers as well as corporate firms. Considering that Texas has unlimited campaign contributions in state legislative elections and is one of the few states that still elects judges on partisan ballots, TPJ should be busy for some time to come. —FRANCESCA HEINTZ