

# City & Region

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## A victory for the local guy

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Settling back in a comfortable chair at the Parker House, Thomas P. O'Neill III seems to be the picture of contentment. Or as close to contentment as someone of his intensity is capable of.

And why not?

He has just managed an unusual feat: He has reclaimed his public relations company from the international communications giant he had sold it to several years ago. The details, he says, are confidential.

As far as O'Neill, the son of political legend Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, is concerned, he has struck a blow for local control in an increasingly international world.

"Boston is becoming a suburb of New York," he grouched. "I'll tell you this: There are companies that would love to get out from under their corporate ownership."

The list of local institutions that are no longer locally owned is a long and familiar one. You're holding one in your hands. Add to it the Red Sox, Jordan Marsh (now Macy's), Arnold Worldwide, and Hill Holiday, among many others.

Every company has its own story to tell; to condemn them all would be silly. Besides, complaining about acquisitive multinational corporations is a bit like complaining about your neighbor's barking dog: You're probably better advised to just get over it.

O'Neill knew what he was doing, or thought he did. In 1999, he sold his company to a unit of the New York-based Omnicom Group, staying on to run the office. He continued to work with a host of major local clients, including the Central Artery and Bechtel/Parsons Brinckerhoff.

At that time, his name was still on the door. The company has become GPC/O'Neill and Associates. Later, his name was dropped, and what had been his company became FH GPC. As O'Neill quipped, "It was like an eye chart."

Turnover in the new company was substantial, O'Neill acknowledged. As time went on, it gradually became a different place. "People leave and they take a chunk of the soul of the company with them," he said.

O'Neill remained. But as the economy soured, he grew increasingly frustrated with corporate directives on staffing and other issues. And many potential clients couldn't keep up with the changes. Some thought O'Neill had retired.

Tommy O'Neill was on the verge of becoming the one thing he never thought he could be in this town: anonymous.

There was another issue. He fretted that the company was becoming less effective. Its whole existence had always rested on its ties to the local power structure. As it became less local, those ties became more difficult to maintain.

"If your market is local, you have to understand the culture," he said. "You have to know what's going on. You've got to be able to understand the issues."

As one might suspect, the whole issue of local ties is something of an obsession for O'Neill. Unlike most of his family, who gradually migrated to Washington during his father's long tenure in Congress, O'Neill stayed rooted to home. He ran his father's campaigns, and then his own. He was lieutenant governor from 1975 to 1983. He's served on many boards and was, for a short time, an unofficial adviser to Cardinal Bernard F. Law, in the early days of the church abuse crisis. He departed when it became clear to him that Law wasn't listening to his counsel.

It isn't just all politics that O'Neill regards as local. He thinks Boston has, in some subtle way, lost control of its own affairs. He isn't the only CEO in town who thinks that way.

He regained control of his former company late last year. And his phone has been ringing — O'Neill says business is up 17 percent over the past two months. His staff has stabilized.

And nobody wonders anymore what ever happened to Tommy O'Neill.

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