

**Harrison's Choice:**

**Playing to Win in the post-ABB Era**

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It might not seem that Tom Harrison's itemization of the myriad failures of nerve and brains on the part of progressives during the 2004 electoral season provides much reason for hope. In fact it does, though in a somewhat backhanded way. For inasmuch as Harrison's piece demonstrates that our collapse was assured by a dogged pursuit of strategies which could have been (and were) predicted in advance to have been suicidal, the way out of the malaise we find ourselves in is clear. Namely, to use our heads and stop denying the self-evident truth which Harrison reminds us of: "the creation of a progressive third party is the sine qua non of radical change."

Puncturing the climate of denial involves going a little bit deeper and recognizing it as a symptom of the left's inability to come to terms with the fact that politics is about power: that we need to be pursue it, achieve it and exercise it. I won't discuss that here except to note that, in addition to Harrison's piece, there are encouraging signs that some of the taboos surrounding discussion on this subject are beginning to fall.

For example, it is only in the wake of the progressive collapse of 2004 that Ruth Conniff is able to ask questions which we should have been asking for years:

"Where is the left's strategy and vision? What is the big picture strategy that could lead to a turnaround in American politics like the one we've just lived through from the right?"

And, obviously, political organizing doesn't happen overnight. Working together, the various rightwing groups put together their winning coalition over many years.

Reading about them now--how they maintained their vision of a conservative America throughout the liberal 1960s and '70s--actually makes me slightly hopeful."<sup>1</sup>

We should be hopeful, though one's optimism is dampened slightly by Conniff's vague use of the expression "political organizing." Organize who, organize what, for what purpose? Conniff doesn't say.

Harrison's piece goes one necessary step further and names the system around which we must organize--the formerly unmentionable third party option. That our choice is "between death by lesser-evilism or life through independent political action" has never been clearer. And for this reason, the collapse of 2004 should not a cause for despair but for real hope.

### **Where We Need to Go**

Of course, knowing where we need to go is only part of the answer. We need to figure out who will help us get there and figure out how to work with them effectively. And here Harrison also provides another reason for hope in reminding us that our potential allies are not only the usual ones: they "consist of the millions of Americans who are sick of wars, insecurity, declining wages, worsening schools, racism, and homophobia and long for peace, equality, and social justice."

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.progressive.org/blogs05/rcarc.php>

But there is a more compelling reason for hope which Harrison does not mention: the advanced state of decay of the main opposition to the development of independent politics, namely the Democratic Party. No amount of bluster from van den Heuvel and Borosage will mask the fact that the party is unreformable for a simple structural reason: its addiction to corporate cash. It is this and not the personal failings of individual politicians which makes its adherence to the right wing consensus on tort reform, bankruptcy, the estate tax and continuing involvement in Iraq inevitable and drearily predictable.

While there is plenty of rot at the top of the party at the national level, more relevant to where we are now and where we need to go is the rot at the bottom, most starkly in the urban big and medium sized machines which have dominated local politics for more than a century. If the national Democrats Party is a tragedy the officials who operate the machine politics in the 21st century have made local politics into a farce typified by the following scenes from news items of last few weeks.

\* "A New York city councilman reportedly presented a staffer with a novelty figurine with a "spring-action moveable penis," squeezed her and told her to keep the doll on her desk, wink-wink. This moment should not be confused with the times when, according to her testimony, he grabbed her when he was clearly aroused, or mentioned how her breasts were "firm for a grandmother," or required her to clean his house." (NYT, April 22, 2005)

\* Chicago West Side Alderwoman Emma Mitts was "courted by Wal-Mart and easily seduced, (becoming) a strident advocate for the retailer. Like many other organizations and individuals, she wasn't much of an expense; according to campaign disclosure

documents filed with the State of Illinois, Wal-Mart rewarded her efforts last November with \$5,000." (The Nation, 3/28/2005)

\*In the “small but vicious world of Brooklyn politics. . . D.A. Joe Hynes . . . in 1996 indicted John O'Hara on a trumped-up ‘illegal voting’ charge as revenge for challenging Democratic machine candidates. . . . for almost a decade Hynes pushed the case through three long trials and the nine appeals” devoting “thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours of court time in a crime-flooded jurisdiction to a politically motivated prosecution.” (NY Press 4/6/05)<sup>2</sup>

\* "Mayor Dick Murphy of San Diego, beset by federal investigations of the city's finances and surrounded by questions of his political legitimacy, announced today that he was resigning effective July 15. . . In the meantime, the interim mayor is expected to be Michael Zucchet, a member of the city council who is under indictment for receiving payments from a Las Vegas strip club owner in exchange for a vote to relax the no-touching rule at San Diego's topless clubs." (NYT, April 26, 2005)

Anyone who reads a local paper or spends a few afternoons at a city hall could almost surely augment these examples with one's of their own. They are merely the vulgar local expression of a national politics defined by greed and cynicism. The difference is that, unlike the U.S. Congress and Senate for which incumbency and access to corporate cash, for the moment, virtually guarantees re-election, local machine candidates can be defeated by effective door to door campaigns. Money and media buys only count for so much on the neighborhood level.

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<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of this scandal and a perceptive analysis and historical overview of machine politics see Christopher Ketcham “A Machine Grows in Brooklyn”, Harpers, December, 2004.

### **The Sleaze Factor: The Democrats' Gift**

In addition to the low comedy which it sometimes provides, the combination of crass opportunism, political cluelessness and mediocrity of low-level Democrats should be seen for what it is: a gift presented by the Democratic Party to the third party movement—a golden opportunity for building the foundation of an insurgent politics exactly where it needs to be built. And this is not the only gift which machine politics in its dotage offers us. Another is low rate of electoral participation in urban areas, something which the machines have tacitly encouraged, as low turnout makes their control of voting blocks through patronage and favors disproportionately significant. It also makes them highly vulnerable to insurgent challengers who require a comparatively few votes provided by social and community networks and little funding in order to upset machine candidates.

That progressives have not taken advantage of this opportunity is baffling.

Why, for example, do progressives in Brooklyn's Park Slope continually return to office machine candidate James Brennan, whose collaboration with corrupt party boss Charles Hynes (referred to above) is now a matter of public record?

Why have so few activists in college towns not followed the lead of New Paltz mayor Jason West in registering voters and taking over their local governments with progressive majorities?

Why did the progressive media almost completely ignore the candidacy of Matt Gonzalez whose heartbreaking near victory for San Francisco mayor, had it been achieved, would have been an enormous shot in the arm to third party organizing?

Why has the Labor Party failed to run a single local candidate for local office?

The answer goes back to the taboo mentioned earlier: the suspicion of organization and power, and the contempt for electoral politics as “celebrity driven affairs . . . unworthy of the attention of serious activists” cynically exploited by Democrats who have long since learned that all we require is that they occasionally mouth the right slogans since we have neither the means nor the will to enforce our demands.

It is these reflexes which we need to reprogram and this reality we need to address.

### **Power from the Bottom Up : Where We Stand**

The next step would be for me to assume the role of third-party evangelist and urge everyone reading this to run for local elective office. But doing so would be silly. Very few of us are in a stage of our lives where we can make the sacrifices required to run a serious campaign. It would also be strategically unrealistic because only a few localities are ripe for third party challenges. These come about in response to specific local circumstances, a particularly egregious sell out by local government to a developer, gross financial mismanagement, or when an outstanding community leader disgusted with the direction of the national party has become fed up and is ready to break ranks. Given the required conditions, potentially successful third party insurgencies are necessarily sporadic and geographically dispersed.

This reality raises a pragmatic question for those of us who are past debating the necessity for independent politics and want to move on to directed action: what are the

mechanisms by which we can meaningfully encourage the development of viable independent candidacies?

A useful starting point is provided by the elections section on the Green Party website <http://www.gp.org/elections.html> which links to all of the party's local and state level candidacies. Many of these campaigns are quixotic, some are naïve, and a small number are disturbingly right wing. More than a few are impressive and represent precisely the sorts of campaigns which have the potential to form the base of a broader political insurgency. While the majority of these, at the moment, are on the west coast, the rest are highly dispersed, including an excellent state organization in Maine, powerful Green voices in Madison, Wisconsin and in Minneapolis. Other encouraging, albeit losing candidacies include Linda Schade's campaign for Maryland House of Delegates, Jill Stein's campaign for Massachusetts State Legislature, the Brooklyn city council campaign of Gloria Mattera, a slate of anti-machine candidates in Baltimore. Had these candidacies been better known, and had they attracted national support, they might have been successful and we might now be building on their foundation. As it is, they represent promising first steps.

While the Green Party has been by far the most successful of existing progressive third parties at winning local office, it would be a mistake to limit our attention to it. Doing so would mean ignoring the Labor Party's politically sophisticated platform and the small but impressive group of union activists working within it. Alas, to repeat, it has yet to run a single candidate nor does its most recent monthly bulletin even mention participation in electoral politics; it needs to be strongly encouraged to use its resources to run serious campaigns. The Working Families Party is more problematic in its faith-

based relation to a “reformable” Democratic Party-precisely that which Harrison demonstrates has led us into the hole we are trying to crawl out of. That said, the WFP should be supported when it runs its own candidates on its own line. Finally, we shouldn't rule out the possibility that the alphabet soup of old left political parties may resurrect themselves and mount credible local candidacies and we should be prepared to support these as well.

### **Practical Politics: A Proposal**

As a practical matter, one can advance independent politics by doing nothing more than visiting a few of these sites and making on-line contributions to those campaigns which seem most promising. The obvious drawbacks to an individualized, uncoordinated approach is that it will result in duplication of effort as we attempt to determine those candidacies which are most promising. What is needed is an organization which would be take the responsibility to research insurgent candidates, form a judgment as to which are most viable and worthy of support and disburse funds from a war chest amassed from the pooled contributions of progressives who have committed themselves to supporting the development of independent politics.

The creation of a national network devoted to offering organizational, financial and moral support to independent electoral politics would, even on a relatively small scale, go a long way to creating a climate in which more of us would be willing to make the necessary step from protesting to participation in power. For the majority of us, those who are sympathetic but who are unwilling or unable to take this step, it will give us the opportunity to at least to put our money where our mouth is. Many would be more than willing to contribute generously to this enterprise.

Of course, only a few sponsored candidacies would be successful in each electoral cycle and it is likely that some will turn out to be disappointments. We should not allow these to obscure the “big picture strategy that could lead to a turnaround in American politics” which Conniff reminds us and which many other progressives now see as the best hope for our future.

While initial progress will be slow, once a critical mass has been reached the basic dynamics of the partisan equation change and the essential contradictions which lie at the heart of the Democratic base will become blindingly obvious. A pro-business party supported by labor? A war mongering party supported by the peace movement? A party complicit in bankruptcy reform claiming to speak for “the middle class”? A party refusing to implement minimal fuel efficiency standards and rejecting the Kyoto accords supported by environmentalists? A party signing off on the racist drug war and welfare reform supported.? How could we have believed anything so absurd, many of us will say in retrospect.

The result will be first a trickle of defections followed by mass exodus as the progressive wing, now seeing a viable electoral alternative, is no longer held captive and coerced into voting against its own interests. A variation on this theme may now playing out in Great Britain as defections from to the Liberal Democrats from the left of New Labour mount while the right abandon its traditional alignment with the Tories in order to shore up Labour. We should not be surprised if something similar happens here-and sooner rather than later.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A similar redrawing of the partisan map occurred San Francisco mayoral election where, it appears, a majority of registered Democrats voted for Gonzalez; Newsom’s victory was achieved through nearly unanimous Republican support.

While we will be pleased to see this future materialize here, it will not come as a complete surprise to those of us who accept Tom Harrison's powerful statement that independent politics are the only game in town. For us, it's long since time we learned the rules and started playing to win.