

Politics Outside the Box: An Introduction and Conclusion

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Most of my politics have revolved around a single question which many of us regard as key to what we hope will be our country's eventual return to sanity. What conditions are required for a third party on and of the left to successfully compete for power within the American electoral system?

What follows is a description of the trajectory of my involvement along with links to some of the articles I wrote along the way.

Some of you know that my interest in this topic is more than theoretical: it is active and it is longstanding. I became convinced in the necessity of a progressive third party with Barry Commoner's presidential campaign of 1980. The first opportunity I had to participate, insofar as it was possible, occurred within Ralph Nader's more or less unofficial candidacy of 1996. When Nader declared his intention to make a serious run in 2000 I would become deeply involved, an experience I document [here](#).

The hours I put into Nader's campaign were not invested in the expectation of his winning or even coming close. Nor, [unlike some third party advocates](#), was my intention to demonstrate the capacity of the left to undermine the coalition required for the Democrats to win national elections. I was aware that the spoiler issue would allow apologists to paint any Democrat, no matter how corrupt and reactionary as preferable to a serious third party challenger. "Those are the guys who brought you George Bush" became a mantra intoned by party hacks in the years since and an effective one: The subsequent decline of the Green Party, most notably in the Democratic machine towns and cities where they had established beachheads testifies to the success of this cynical canard, one for which neither the Greens, nor those urging the Greens to embrace the spoiler role, have yet to develop a convincing rebuttal.

The promise of Nader's Green Party campaign consisted almost entirely in its potential for establishing a foundation for local and state level third party candidacies. These, according to the plan, would take advantage of the organization set up in the wake of the 2000 election and continue well into the future. At best, some would follow the trajectory of Bernie Sanders, elected to the US Senate last year as an Independent Socialist. The routine downplaying of Sanders' third party affiliation is unfortunate since Sanders' success should lead us to ask the question above in a slightly different form: why we do not have several other Independent Socialists or Greens in the senate, more in Congress and still more in state legislatures and city councils? While there are many reasons why there are not, I would argue that there are no GOOD reasons.

To argue this point convincingly will take more time than I can afford to devote to it here. Suffice to say that the primary obstacle is not, as many have argued, statutory. Yes, a thicket of exclusionary laws passed by the majors place an undue burden on third

parties- but as Sanders and many others have demonstrated, these can be overcome. Furthermore, as I would discover in my involvement with the minutiae of election law, the statutes are not uniformly stacked against third parties. For example, cities in Connecticut and around the country have minority party set-asides which can be and have been used to a third party's advantage. Some states are beginning to offer public financing for candidates meeting a fairly minimal threshold of support. Even without these in effect financial barriers are not insurmountable-though compensating for the inevitable handicap will require the careful organization of a substantial grassroots volunteer base-a point I discuss in the above memoir.

If I'm right about this, a larger point follows, namely that the failure of third parties is not written in the stars but is in ourselves-in our failure to take advantage of clear opportunities that are available to us to achieve real political power. The set of attitudes preventing us from doing so are the focus of [this essay](#) which takes as its point of departure the slogan "If the people lead, the leaders will follow." Given that our political leaders respond to protest by running in the opposite direction of where we are marching it is time not only to put the slogan out to pasture, but more importantly the assumptions which confer on it its status as a shibboleth. A [follow-up piece](#) attempts to make concrete suggestions for the kind of organization a functional left should be developing to move beyond the self-imposed limits of protest politics to participation in power. While I am not alone in making such proposals that nothing of the sort which I describe seems to have materialized in the interim means that a critical mass of consensus on this point has not been reached among the left, such as it is. Nor are there any signs that it is emerging- a point to which I will return later.

In any case, one does not advance a critique of politics obsessed with rhetoric on the rhetorical level. Issuing one more scholarly monograph, blog entry, or seminar to a room full of like-minded activists is not only useless but counterproductive in reinforcing the pathology that the clever manipulation of words, iron clad arguments and the acquisition of irrefutable data are substitutes for or even point in the direction of concrete action. The most effective, arguably the only effective statement, is to show by example that the foundations for real political power can be established, that power can be achieved and exercised in advancing a left agenda on whatever level this is possible. There was a brief period when Nader campaigned nationally and the local Green Party chapters which supported it seemed to be breaking through with this message. Among the most receptive areas were the academic ghettos in New Haven where I was living at the time where Nader came close to beating Gore and obliterated Bush.

It was the low level, nuts and bolts and frequently menial involvement in the Nader campaign which woke some of us up to the potential opening the electoral system provides, even in its presently existing corrupt and anti-democratic form. And a few of us would go further moving beyond the rhetorical politics with which we are most comfortable into what can be reasonably called real politics. As most of you know, in my case this took the form of serving as a Green Party member of the New

Haven Board of Alderman, winning a special election in July of 2001 and the regular election in November of that year. An account of my experiences in that capacity can be found [here](#). A discussion of the type of campaign strategies which were successful for us can be found [here](#). Some of my other writings from this period including my semi-regular "Halle Sez" columns are on this site [here](#).

Rather than constituting my first steps up the political ladder, my one and a half terms on the Board of Alderman marked the highest rungs I would achieve followed by a precipitous descent for me and the New Haven Greens. In what follows, I will mention some of the factors that were involved in my withdrawal and the local party's decline. But before I do that, this is probably as good a place as any to issue an apology to my Green Party comrades. My failure to secure an orderly transition left them disillusioned and disappointed in me and this is something which I particularly regret as some of them are among the finest people I have ever known. None of the reasons I discuss here are intended as an excuse for this and other organizational failures for which I take responsibility and which I am willing to discuss if it would be helpful to do so. The first reason for my withdrawal is somewhat personal and I share it here because something of the kind is likely to be encountered by other groups having success at electing insurgent candidates to office. I was able to win partly because I had achieved the sort of conventional respectability as a homeowner and taxpayer which made my candidacy palatable to voters who might not otherwise be sympathetic to my politics. Paradoxically, this same profile made it more difficult for me to make the sacrifices that were required to continue to function in politics. It would have meant jettisoning a dream job-teaching music to undergraduates at Yale in exchange for a political future which may very well have been no future at all. The prospect of long term marginal employment and non-employment as a gadfly activist was decidedly unattractive if not a bit frightening.

Of course, it came as no surprise when the Democratic machine devoted a high fraction of its campaign resources in an unsuccessful effort to unseat me in November, even to the extent of leaving a vulnerable Republican in another ward unopposed. No more surprising was the active participation of nominal Yale liberals who were then beginning their expected upward trajectory through Democratic Party ranks. Yale liberals in the service of machine politics, frequently in its most thuggish form have been a prominent feature of the New Haven landscape for generations—an arrangement which nurtured the political careers of, among others, Bill Clinton and Joseph Lieberman. Exposing this marriage of convenience was a factor in my decision to enter politics, so by no means did it constitute a factor in my decision to withdraw from it. Having said that, the blatant albeit well concealed opportunism of Yale liberals was stunning to even a cynic such as myself. And this awareness made me increasingly unsure of the coalition which served as a foundation for the local party.

Reinforcing this insecurity was an incident in the spring following my re-election. By then war on Iraq was imminent and the local party took the lead in passing one of the country's first resolutions opposing military action as well as sponsoring local demonstrations. One of these would feature a Palestinian Yale Law School student

whose appearance provoked accusations of anti-semitism from supporters of Israel some of whom had been active in the local party. An article in the "alternative" weekly headlined "When Green Turned to Hate" provided a megaphone for the critics. Replete with half truths and character assassination now familiar from attacks on Jimmy Carter, the patent intellectual dishonesty of the coverage was a bit shocking and, unfortunately, likely consequential in undermining some of the support for the party.

While this was upsetting at the time, in retrospect this was only a relatively dramatic instance of the sorts of fissures which any party attempting to forge a left coalition will have to deal with. No party can be all things to all people nor should it be. The best it can do is to take decent and principled stands one of which is a no brainer: opposition to military aid to governments engaging in widespread and systematic human rights abuses. Such stands will inevitably antagonize those having emotional attachments to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, the United States as well as those who continue to view Israel, against all evidence, as "a light unto nations". The hope, and I believe the reality, is that in the long run, a foundation constructed on integrity and honesty will stand in increasingly stark contrast to the major parties whose politics are based on the windfalls of corporate cash which manipulation, cynicism and dishonesty provide access to. At minimum, political integrity means standing firm against individuals in the party for whom a pet cause-whether it is a zoning variance for a parking lot or the rearming of helicopter war ships to attack Gaza-constitutes a litmus test for their support and being willing to accept the cost in doing so.

The assumption that principled politics are ultimately winning politics might have been vindicated given more time and under more favorable circumstances. Unfortunately, and this amounts to my third reason for my stepping down, the Green's brief rise occurred at the most unfavorable historical moment imaginable in that it overlapped almost exactly with the climate of repression ushered in by 9/11 and the assaults on any and all expressions of political non-conformity. While it might be expected otherwise, the climate in New Haven was no more welcoming or tolerant of dissent than anyplace else. A good indication was the response to an upside- down American flag hung outside of a Yale dorm window which would precipitate a forced entry by two by four wielding student athletes accompanied by the following message: "I love kicking the Muslims ass bitches ass! They should all die with Mohammad. We as Americans should destroy them and launch so many missiles their mothers don't produce healthy offspring. F*ck Iraqi Saddam following f*cks." A letter appearing in the Yale Daily News was representative of the reaction of much of the Yale community: Both sides should apologize, those perpetrating a criminal act as well as the student guilty of making the anti-war statement. It came as no surprise that that in the months following, anti-war protest at Yale was conspicuous by its absence. The only regular table on Beineke Plaza was not that of organizers arranging attendance at large peace demonstrations in New York and Washington but Students Against Nuclear Iran organized by supporters of Israel to advocate for an expansion of the U.S. military in the mideast. Obviously, such a climate in the most "liberal" bastion of a presumably liberal city did not bode well for a party committed to non-violent resolutions to international conflicts.

In short, the internal divisions in the Greens made us vulnerable, as did the organizational failures mentioned above for which I share some responsibility. But even had all of us devoted more of our energies and even had we been informed with divine foresight in our political decisions, it seems more or less inevitable that the right wing tidal wave unleashed by 9/11 would have forced us into a holding pattern at best, and probably a decline more or less on the scale of that which would occur. An excellent candidate attempting to assume my seat on the board would be defeated by a standard issue Yale technocrat. The other Green elected in 2001, a born again Christian and former Bush supporter, whose commitment to left politics was never more than dubious, would leave the party in 2003 as would another equally opportunistic local politician in Hartford. A good hearted but embarrassingly inarticulate Green has become a perennial candidate in elections at all levels. This included the 2006 Senatorial race in which his performance in nationally covered debates reinforced the stereotype that the Greens are "not ready for primetime."

Where the Greens have ended up is obviously disappointing to those of us who had devoted time, money and energy to the party. That said our disappointment is mitigated by the fact that we recognized going in that our investment was a gamble. The potential payoff was that which I alluded to above: the beginnings of a move towards a real oppositional party of a sort that most of the developed world takes for granted and which is a necessary condition for a real shift in the political center of gravity to take place here. We ended up losing our wager-many hours writing press releases, creating databases, studying voter lists, getting to know our neighbors and neighborhood-none of this ended up creating a foundation for independent, non-corporate candidates to move up the political ladder.

But in itemizing our losses, it becomes apparent that these are really not losses at all. For what all this amounts to is not wasted energy but experience in the form of a real world and intimate understanding of how political power works and what is required to achieve it. In particular we understand the precise nature of the rotten core which lies at the heart of urban machines. And we demonstrated how a small number of political novices are able to successfully challenge it and begin to build a foundation for a broader insurgency.

The knowledge we acquired does not seem, at the present moment, to be particularly relevant or useful. Since the 2004 election, a broad consensus has emerged that the only hope for effecting a transformation of the political system involves reforming the Democratic Party from the inside. While I don't expect that the reformist project will succeed, I am in no way hostile to it and I have a great deal of respect for some of those who are advancing it. In particular, I find David Sirota's writings and his organizing to be consistently well informed, savvy and credible. Sirota, and like minded organizations such as the Progressive Democrats of America are undoubtedly aware of the wholesale corruption of urban Democratic machines, but their focus is on national and state level races and on two objectives in particular: driving the Republicans further

into the ditch while attempting to wrest control of the party from DLC hacks such as Rahm Emanuel and Steny Hoyer who have operated it for a generation.

The results of the 2006 elections provided some grounds for optimism on achieving the first objective and it seems likely that 2008 will bring further gains. The second objective is a much tougher nut to crack. There is no evidence that grassroots base of the party- the Wellstonian Democratic wing of the Democratic party-has had its hand strengthened in any significant respect. A good indication was the recent vote on the Iraq supplemental which the PDA lobbied congressional Democrats to reject. That only six Democrats vote no shows that the PDA remains no less marginal than those who have remained on the outside-their efforts to make themselves respectable notwithstanding. An earlier indication was the Lieberman victory in Connecticut over Lamont, in which the national party demonstrated to the anti-war Democrats in no uncertain terms who really holds the cards. In perhaps the most significant indication of the near total grip of the corporate wing, not only does every serious presidential candidate pay homage either explicitly or implicitly to the corporate-militarist wing, unlike in previous years there is not even any discussion of a candidate who be credibly claimed to represent the party's left. A year before the first primaries and the Kucinich candidacy has already become a joke. Judging from the polls where he doesn't even register, I may be one of the few who even knows who Mike Gravel is and what he stands for-or at least used to. That Wesley Clark, a known war criminal, has assumed the role of a marginal peace candidate is among the more bizarre ironies of the through the looking glass political system which we have made for ourselves.

As for the front runners, comment is no longer necessary on Hillary Clinton following her having received the endorsement of Rupert Murdoch. In contrast, her main competitor Obama makes for a particularly impressive candidate-virtually a platonic ideal- for those concerned with the continuing dominance of the nation's political system by those who own it. His recent comment that he would "not play chicken" with American lives by "cutting off funding to the troops" was surely received warmly by military contractors who need not be concerned about reductions in cold war level defense expenditures to address domestic needs. His promotion of ethanol under the guise of an environmentally responsible energy policy was another indication of his ability to provide a veneer of activist legitimacy to what is just one more scam funneling federal subsidies to agribusiness. His abject genuflection before AIPAC immediately on the heels of throwing an [old Palestinian friend under a bus](#) signaled as a near certainty that death, torture and misery will continue unabated on the West Bank. Staking out these positions surely played a role in his reaching his \$25 million fundraising target, but it came at the expense of any claim to representing minimally decent politics. While I agree with Sirota that the current dark horse candidate Edwards may have the most credible purchase on populist support, [this assessment](#) by Doug Ireland effectively removes the halo which Edwards has managed to acquire. Edwards has recognized that the only hope for his campaign lies in taking advantage of activist energies to compensate for what is likely to be an inability to compete on the financial playing field. This realpolitik recognition in no way should be seen as a repudiation of the more or less classic neo-liberal profile staked out during Edwards' tenure in the Senate. That said, it is not

impossible that I will register as a Democrat to vote for Edwards in the New York primary if it seems likely that this will make a difference.

Given their support among liberals- some pragmatic, some star struck and others merely opportunistic- it may take some years into an Obama or Edwards administration for an awareness to sink in among the Wellstonians that they have been played for suckers yet again. But if American troops are still dying in Iraq in 2010, no serious attempt is made to deal with Global Warming, wealth and income disparities continue their steady progression to still more grotesque levels, bloated military budgets prevent addressing a dangerously decaying domestic infrastructure, those who are willing to face the facts will recognize that the reformist strategy had the opposite effect of what was intended. Rather than strengthening the influence of the rank and file core of the Democratic Party, its having yet again pledged its unconditional fealty to the party will have resulted in a further erosion of its already insignificant influence.

When this occurs, we will be back to where we were in the waning years of the Clinton presidency. An awareness will return that the only hope for the future lies in the development of organized politics which is explicitly directed to challenging a two party system, one whose very essence is defined by corporate domination, unchecked militarism and environmental pillage. At this point, the work which the Greens did and for that matter the important ongoing work which some Greens continue to do, will have many lessons for how activists need to direct their energies. If and when this occurs, I and others will again have something to contribute. At the moment, as should be apparent from the rest of this website, I'm perfectly happy remaining on the sidelines while tending to, figuratively speaking though somewhat literally, my own garden here in the Hudson Valley.