

Chapter Seven

Government Of, By and For the People and the Earth

There is an essential objective which must be reached if all of our movement-building for clean energy and a truly life-sustaining, just, fair and peaceful society is to be accomplished: the establishment of a government of the people, by the people and for the people. Or, to bring it up to date, of, by and for the people and the Earth.

We have nothing close to it right now. To the disappointment of many millions who put their hopes in him, Barack Obama has revealed that, at best, his government is of, by and for the people, the big corporations, the military and the banks, and in that kind of a government the people almost always lose out, usually big-time. Timothy Geithner, Lawrence Summers and Robert Gates, as leading examples, are not exactly tribunes of the people.

Some activists, experiencing over and over the corruption and lies of our two-party political system, conclude that we should spend little energy trying to influence elected officials or have anything to do with trying to elect better ones. I understand this position, but I've always thought it to be like cutting off your nose to spite your face. We have no choice: we have to relate in some way to those who are making the life-and-death decisions that impact us and people all around the world. We have to demand that government at all levels do what the civics books say it is supposed to do: represent the people, not the monied interests.

This doesn't mean that all of us should be spending lots of our time directly involved in election campaigns or in lobbying those in office in between elections. Though some in our movements must do these things, they must be done with the clear understanding that electing people to office is not the same thing as "power to the people." Until we have a political and economic system that is truly democratic, one in which workers, farmers, consumers, community people—the people—are more than pawns to be moved around on a gigantic, worldwide chessboard by powerful elites, we must be building the strongest possible independent, grassroots-based, multi-racial, activist as well as electoral popular movement.

As a climate activist working for a group based in the Washington, D.C. area, I have witnessed up close how "inside the beltway" groups can lose sight of this truth (and some never had it to begin with).

As I wrote about in chapter one, I was actively involved via my role as Policy Director of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network in efforts by D.C.-based environmental and climate groups to influence the federal climate legislation that began to be developed after Barack Obama won the Presidency in November, 2008. This included weekly meetings with reps of a number of those groups in Nancy Pelosi's office with top-level staff from her and Majority Leader Steny Hoyer's office.

These meetings started happening in mid-April after the House Energy and Commerce Committee chaired by Henry Waxman made public a draft of comprehensive climate legislation on March 31st. The meetings were not—ever—about the content of that legislation or how to counter the increasingly more problematic specifics of it as Waxman, Congressman Ed Markey, Pelosi, Hoyer and others attempted to move it through that committee and onto the House floor. The meetings were all about how to get Congressional votes for this bill, in whatever final form it ended up.

During this time climate and enviro groups were doing all they could to bring pressure to bear for a climate bill primarily via the tactic of lobbying. This included bringing delegations of business people, or hunters and fishermen, or others to D.C. for “constituent meetings” with their Congresspeople. It included getting people back in their home districts to make calls and send emails and organize town hall meetings and other meetings. All of this was important work. My organization, myself included, did these things also. But there were two big problems the way much of it was done.

One was that, despite calls for a “strong, science-based bill,” most of the groups doing this work were, in practice, reducing that objective to number two on their list of priorities. Number one was getting a bill, any bill, passed. This was the response from almost all of them, as not just Republicans but coal-state and oil-state Democrats frustrated the development of the kind of climate legislation needed. Coal-state Democrats, like Rick Boucher of southwest Virginia, were throwing their political weight around, and they were getting results. Drip by drip, we kept learning about changes being made to the original draft bill that were making it worse and worse for the climate.

The other problem was that there was no strategy for mass mobilization during this entire time. It was round-the-clock lobbying, most of it invisible to the general public. As far as I know, there were only three demonstrations on Capitol Hill during the entire six-month period when House climate legislation was being worked on. One was the Capitol coal plant action on March 2nd; the second was a nonviolent civil disobedience sit-in at Rick Boucher’s office that my group organized on May 21st, the day that Waxman’s House Energy and Commerce Committee voted out their weakened bill; and the third was a hastily-pulled-together action involving about 100 people on June 26th, the day that the full House voted on the Waxman-Markey bill. During the critical time period from April 1 to June 25th, when the House legislative process was moving towards a floor vote, there was no coalitional effort made to pull together large numbers of people to visibly demand the kind of legislation needed by our severely threatened ecosystem.

Why did most environmental groups respond in these ways?

One reason was a carry-over from the success of the Democrats on November 4th, election day. Far too many groups, from the political left to the center, believed that with strong control of all three branches of Congress by the Democrats that we were in good position to get strong legislation. I include myself here. We were wrong.

Another is the political fact that there is very close interconnection at top levels between the leadership of the more mainstream environmental groups and the Democratic Party. This tends to be true of other mainstream, inside-the-beltway groups on other issues also.

A third is that the Left in the United States, including the left of the climate movement, was not together enough to pull off anything of substance. These groups, also, did little more than lobbying campaigns.

The reality of the U.S. electoral system certainly contributed to all of these dynamics.

An Undemocratic Electoral System

As I wrote about in chapter five, it is difficult to get solutions via legislation to the deep-seated injustices and crises we face when we have a two-parties-only, winner-take-all, corporate-dominated political/electoral system.

In most of the world's major democracies, the electoral system is a parliamentary system in which representatives are elected through some form of proportional representation (PR), where seats are apportioned on the basis of the percentage of votes obtained. Countries which do so include: Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Mexico, New Zealand, Brazil, Russia, Ireland, Israel, Spain, Australia, Italy, Japan, Norway, Finland, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Portugal. Iraq uses PR!

In these and other countries, parties which achieve 5% of the vote get 5% of the representation in national or state/provincial legislatures. Some countries have an even lower threshold, and some provide public funding and free air time on television. It's almost as if they think it's important for the electorate to understand the differences between parties.

In the US winner-take-all system, a political party could win an average of 30-35% or more of the vote for its candidates for a state or federal legislature but, if the vote was not distributed the right way, get no more than 5-10% of the seats. This reality encourages what are called "centrist" policies—more like "corporate-friendly" policies—in a conscious effort by Democrats and Republicans to win elections. Under this winner-take-all system it is much more difficult to build an effective political alternative to these two well-funded entities.

They are well-funded, of course, because of the many ways that the small minority of rich people--the millionaires and billionaires--in the U.S. are able to use their wealth for their interests. They do this through corporate political action committees, paid lobbyists, corporate-controlled "citizens organizations" (also known as "astroturf" groups) used to influence legislation, or outright bribes, suitably disguised as campaign contributions. This has meant that for most of the people running for office from both major parties, it is hard to do so and win without compromising basic principles. The higher up you go in the electoral arena, the more difficult it is to avoid being sucked into the system's corruption.

Fortunately, there are some Congressional districts that consistently elect progressive-minded people to political office, an indication that, despite all of the structural obstacles, there is a widespread desire among many millions in this country for a very different kind of politics.

I've personally experienced and observed this many times over my over 40 years of political activism. As I wrote about previously, when I ran for office as a Green Party U.S. Senate candidate in 2002, my vote total was low—only a little over 1% of the vote—but my campaign helped to energize the New Jersey Green Party such that next year, 2003, we ran 49 candidates throughout the state. Most of them were for State Assembly and State Senate. The average percentage of the vote received by those candidates was 5%, double what it was four years earlier. If New Jersey was in another country, we could have gotten representation in a provincial legislature with that kind of vote.

There were the close-to seven million votes that Jesse Jackson got within Democratic Party primaries running for President in 1988, about double what he had gotten four years previously. A poll at the time showed that if he had gone on to run as an independent for President, he would have begun his campaign with the support of 15% of the electorate.

Ross Perot, hardly a progressive but whose successful campaign was an indicator of political sentiment at the grassroots, received 18% of the vote when he ran for President in 1992. Ralph Nader and Winona LaDuke received a little less than 3 million votes in 2000, the high water mark so far for the Green Party, but just a few days before election day, and for weeks beforehand, polls showed that around twice that number of people, 5% of the electorate, preferred them. But when half those voters got in the voting booth, the strength of the “don't waste your vote” argument and the closeness of the race between Bush and Gore had its impact.

It is clear that substantive electoral reform must be part of the agenda of all movements and organizations that are about substantive social change. In my view, the two reforms that would do the most to open up the political system would be the enactment of public financing of elections, similar to what already exists in the states of Maine and Arizona, and instant runoff voting.

Instant runoff voting, or IRV, is an electoral reform that is growing in popularity and is being used in a number of municipalities. It's a simple reform. When voters vote, instead of voting for just one candidate, they rank their preferences, 1, 2, 3, etc. If no one gets a majority of the number 1 votes, second place and other preferences are used to choose a winner.

This system does several things. It completely eliminates the “spoiler” problem. People can vote for the candidate they like the most without worrying that by doing so they're going to help the candidate they like the least. IRV encourages a more honest process of political debate because candidates know they may need the second or third place preferences of voters to get elected. And it makes it more possible for new candidates without tremendous amounts of money to have a chance of winning even without campaign finance reform, e.g., public financing of elections.

Other electoral reforms needed if we are to move to a truly 21st century electoral system include: abolition of the 18th century created electoral college; election day voter registration (not having to do so a month or more in advance); free air time and participation in debates for all ballot-qualified candidates; moving towards proportionality in the way state and federal legislatures are elected; reform of discriminatory ballot access laws; and the professionalization and de-politicization of election administrative bodies.

We also need something which combines the best of the experiences of the Rainbow movement of the 80s, the Social Forum movement of this decade and the on-going work of third party activists and activist progressive Democrats.

Needed: A United Progressives Alliance

As I wrote about in chapter five, what we need to advance this electoral reform agenda, as well as a progressive agenda on a wide range of issues, is an alliance of progressives working in the Democratic Party, in progressive third party groups and as community, labor or issue-based organizers.

Such an alliance, a United Progressives movement, would work with issue-oriented movements to help them win direct action and legislative victories. It would be involved in legislative processes at the local, state and federal levels, working to enact the best possible legislation to protect the people and the Earth. And it would actively support candidates running for political office.

What would unite these candidacies? Several things.

One would be a consistently progressive platform on the issues. Single-payer health care. Significantly reducing the bloated military budget. De-escalation of the war in Afghanistan. Ending all fossil fuel subsidies and shifting them to jobs-creating energy efficiency programs and renewables. Policies to reduce carbon emissions by half or more by 2020. Marriage equality and full civil and human rights for l/g/b/t people. Government programs to create jobs and stop foreclosures. Racial and gender justice. Reform of our racially discriminatory and often-unjust criminal “justice” system. A wealth tax on the rich and progressive tax reform. Breaking up the “too big to fail” banks and investment corporations like Goldman Sachs. Land reform and support to sustainable family farms and farm coops. Defense of women’s right to choose on abortion. Support for instant runoff voting, proportional representation, public financing of elections and other electoral reforms. And more. Candidates would be required to commit to vocal support of this platform before they would receive any support from the united third force.

A second would be a commitment to tactical flexibility as far as elections. For example, there could be a local situation where both a progressive Democrat and a Green wanted to run for Congress, one attempting to get the Democratic Party nomination in the DP primary, the other collecting signatures to be placed on the ballot as an independent (or running as part of an

already-ballot-qualified third party). Before the local unit of United Progressives agreed to support both of these efforts, I would think it would be necessary that the third party candidate agree to end her/his campaign if the progressive Democrat won in the primary, and the progressive Democrat would have to agree that if s/he didn't win the primary that s/he would actively support the third party candidate.

The bottom line would be that there could be no United Progressives candidates running against one another for the same political office and that the relevant organizational unit—a local chapter, a state chapter or the national organization—would have the power to decide which candidate to support if there was a conflict.

Finally, United Progressives and its candidates would consistently give leadership in the effort to bring our 19th century political system into the 21st century via a whole series of reforms to open up and democratize it. It must be a primary function of this new third force to champion serious electoral reform.

I am fully aware that this project, if/when it begins to develop, will be attacked from both the “left” and the “right.” From the left, activists who view any involvement with Democrats, even progressive ones, as a form of betrayal of principles will cry “sellout.” From the right, those who want to head off any serious boat-rocking of the Democratic Party, any alliance of progressive Democrats with third party activists, will do their best to sabotage and undercut this effort.

But what's the alternative? Continuing to hope for the best with the Democrats as they reveal under Obama all too clearly that while there may be a change in the skin color of the President, there've been few substantive changes in policy from the days of Bill Clinton? Or continuing to run Green Party and other third party campaigns that help to keep hope alive for an alternative but which have made little progress building a truly mass party, one which commands the allegiance and support of millions?

That is what we need, a U.S. version of it, the sooner the better.

We need to combine the energies and resources of those of us who get it on the extreme limitations of the two-party system but who also understand that the process of building an alternative to it involves both allegiance to principles and tactical flexibility.

In this work we need to be “realistically visionary.” Doing so involves, first, recognizing that each of us brings our particular experiences and truths to a coalition but that others do too, and that all of us, whether third partyites, progressive Democrats or dedicated community or union organizers, have been frustrated by the systemic obstacles put in our way as we have tried to build a strong movement for positive social change.

We need a style of discussion and decision-making that is healthy and mature. Immanuel Wallerstein has written of what is needed in the context of linking different movements, but his

words are completely appropriate to the process of forging something like United Progressives: we need “a conscious effort at empathetic understanding of the other movements, their histories, their priorities, their social bases, their current concerns. Correspondingly, increased empathy needs to be accompanied by restraint in rhetoric. It does not mean that movements should not be frank with each other, even in public. It means that the discussion needs to be self-consciously comradely, based on the recognition of a unifying objective, a relatively democratic, relatively egalitarian world.” (1)

Internal democracy needs to be a fundamental building block of such an alliance. It will need charismatic and visionary leaders, for sure, and it will need skilled and dedicated organization builders, but it must ultimately be controlled by its active members. The internal process of discussion must be one in which fresh insights are welcomed. New leadership must constantly be developing and emerging. It must have the kind of internal culture written about in chapter four.

From the beginning it must be about positive efforts to be inclusive, with significant leadership from people of color, women, working-class people, youth, lgbt people and other constituencies. It must reflect the reality of our multi-cultural and diverse population.

Mechanisms must be built so that in between elections those members of the alliance who are elected officials are in on-going communication with alliance leadership, and membership. There must be functioning accountability processes.

And it must, from the beginning, prioritize the climate crisis as one of its top issues. No issue is more important or more urgent. James Hansen, one of the pre-eminent climate scientists in the world, said in 2006 that we had no more than 10 years to reverse course as far as our energy policies if we were to have a chance of avoiding catastrophic climate change. In the four years since we have seen ice melt in the Arctic beyond what any scientist expected. Global CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels have risen 29% between 2000 and 2008 (2). All over the world glaciers are melting at a rate that will guarantee severe water scarcity for billions within decades. One third or more of all plant and animal species may die out within this century, even by mid-century, if we don't make a u-turn soon. The list can go on and on.

Our established political and economic structures are failing us. They are literally blocking our path to continued survival, on the climate issue and in many other ways. We must face the truth, and we must have the courage to do what must be done. We are the generation, we are in the historical moment, this is the time when the world must make its turn, must revolve away from a certain path toward catastrophe. We can bring about a very different story; there is a future worth fighting for, but it will take many millions of us living right and acting tirelessly every day to bring it about.

We must rise up now.

FOOTNOTES

- 1) Immanuel Wallerstein, from “Antisystemic Movements,” in *Transforming the Revolution*, Monthly Review Press, p. 62
- 2) *The Independent*, “World on course for catastrophic 6 degree rise, reveal scientists,” Nov. 18, 2009