



Memo to Progressives: Green or the Graveyard

by Scott McLarty

Is it time for progressive, antiwar, and pro-environmental activists and voters to look beyond the Democratic Party and seek other alliances?

There's only one plausible excuse left for such voters to remain loyal to the Dems in the realm of electoral politics: to prevent the GOP from winning. Some progressives insist that we need to continue supporting Democrats because of Supreme Court appointments (although Dems in Congress have approved some of the most ideologically rigid Republican appointees) and to save reproductive rights (already watered down, with Democratic help), but these are corollaries of the 'defeat the Republicans' argument.

Is this enough reason to invest eternal hope in the Democratic Party? Is there any future for progressives beyond excuse-making?

It's no secret that voters who call themselves progressive have been frustrated by the Obama Administration's broken promise of "change we can believe in." The list of disappointments is extensive:

The recent deal with Republicans to extend President Bush's tax cuts for the wealthy.

Escalation of the Afghanistan War; continuation of Bush-Cheney-era assaults on the US Constitution; persecution of whistleblowers.

Dismissal of the public option (in early negotiations with corporate lobbies, we now know); passage of a health care reform bill with legally questionable 'mandates' that funnel our money into private for-profit insurance companies, with no measures to bring down health care expenses or save Americans from financial ruin over medical emergencies.

Authorization of new nuclear plants built with taxpayer money (private industry considers nuclear power too risky and expensive for their own investments); embrace of the 'clean coal' myth while allowing mountaintop removal mining to devastate and poison the landscapes of West Virginia and other states.

Continuation of the failed and wasteful War on Drugs, silence about the mass incarceration of young black and poor men, and the powerful for-profit private prison system that makes money by filling up cells.

Taxpayer-funded Wall Street bailouts; hiring of Wall Street insiders like Tim Geithner and Larry Summers for key financial positions; minimal aid for Americans losing their homes because of the subprime mortgage crisis; appointment of the 'Catfood Commission' to mull cuts to Social Security; continued support and military aid for Israel's brutal violation of the basic human rights of Palestinians.... We can go on and on.

Aside from slogans, Democrats in recent elections have offered no inspiring vision of a better America. In 2010, the only appeal to voters seemed to be "we're not as dreadful as the Tea Party or George W. Bush."

The Democratic Party represents what Chris Hedges calls “a corrupt liberal class, bereft of ideas and unable to respond coherently to the collapse of the global economy, the dismantling of our manufacturing sector and the deadly assault on the ecosystem.”

It’s getting worse. Bemoaning the “shellacking” that Dems suffered on Election Day 2010, President Obama signaled that he’s ready to compromise with the Republican majority in the US House. Since he tried to appease the GOP endlessly during his first two years, what he means now is capitulation, which certainly describes the tax cut deal.

And he’s doing so despite the fact that 28 out of 54 of nearly-Republican ‘Blue Dog’ Dems were defeated on Nov. 2, while 66 of the 69 members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus were reelected to Congress. These results suggest that voters favor Dems who stand up for their stated values.

Republican politicians aren’t impressed with Mr. Obama’s overtures. They’ve made it clear that their main objective is to defeat him in 2012. We can therefore trust the GOP to stake out even more rightwing positions than ever before, with their own vision of America as a Limbaugh-Gingrich wonderland of minimal government services and protections for citizens, vilification of vulnerable minorities (immigrants, Muslims, gay people) and anyone who disagrees with them (liberals, “liberals”), and maximum corporate and military power. (Chris Hedges and others warn that Republicans are on the brink of fascism. I prefer to call it Foxism.)

The 2010 election repeats a pattern evident in recent decades. The Democratic establishment retreats from the party’s traditional values and constituencies in the belief that they’ll appeal to an imagined center, all the while competing for strings-attached corporate campaign checks against an increasingly extremist Republican Party.

Graveyard of Progressive Ideals

Progressives play no part in this paradigm. Dem leaders take progressive votes for granted, and admirable Democratic politicians like Dennis Kucinich and John Conyers serve mainly to herd progressive voters back into the party’s fold in every presidential election. Despite the sincerest wishes of The Nation’s editorial page, there’s no hope for rehabilitation of the Democratic Party.

Ralph Nader wants to see a progressive face Mr. Obama in the race for the 2012 Democratic nomination. Progressive challengers from Jesse Jackson to Dennis Kucinich have competed since the 1980s, only to see the nod go to the corporate-dollar contender and any hint of progressivism jettisoned from the party platform.

The Democratic leadership holds the party’s progressive base in contempt. Rahm Emanuel called those who complained about President Obama’s broken promises of change “retards” and Vice President scolded them for whining.

Mr. Obama and other Dems condemned the Supreme Court’s Citizens United ruling, which knocked down limits to corporate spending on partisan political ads. But they won’t escape its effect. The power of corporate elites to influence both parties’ candidates and hijack the public debate on any given issue has expanded far beyond what we’ve imagined.

Most progressives have only been able to see as far as the next election. Sure, the prospect of another Republican White House is scary. Here’s something a lot scarier: another century of public debates and elections limited to D vs. R. (For a sobering prognosis of America’s future, if we remain stuck in the same political groove, see Alfred W. McCoy’s “The Decline and Fall of the American Empire: Four Scenarios for the End of the American Century by 2025.”)

The rule of two parties under the influence of corporate money has already pushed the US into a condition called ‘state monopoly capitalism’, in which government serves the demands of a corporate oligarchy to the extent that the two estates become inseparable. Hence the shrinkage of the middle class and widening gap between the wealthy and the rest of us, regardless of which party holds power.

US politics can be compared to the swinging pendulum of a grandfather clock that keeps tilting further and further to the right. If it tilts any further, it may topple over.

Short of revolution, there's only one possible interruption to this dynamic: emergence of an alternative party that embraces progressive populist, anti-imperial, and ecological ideals and rejects corporate money and influence. That describes the Green Party.

Some progressives within the Democratic Party assert that "It's not the right time for the Green Party."

The GOP isn't going to disappear by magic, so it'll never be the "right time." With such arguments, progressive Dems make themselves unintentional apologists for the rightward-tilting status quo. Their relationship with their own party is like a soap opera: "If I only stay true to her, some day she'll stop cheating and be faithful again!"

The "One Nation, Working Together" rally at the Lincoln Memorial on October 2, 2010, offered no challenge to President Obama or Democrats in Congress. Except for entertainer Harry Belafonte, not one speaker suggested that, if President Obama ended all military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and called the troops home, we'd have enough in the federal budget to cover urgent human needs.

In his Black Agenda Report coverage of the event, Glen Ford wrote, "After spending millions to assemble a multitude, Big Labor, the NAACP and the usual Black entertainers -- Reverends Sharpton and Jesse Jackson -- could not fix their trembling lips to utter one demand to the Power in the White House, whose disfavor they fear even more than they dread the white nationalist hordes of the Tea Party." ("Ignominious Surrender On The Mall," October 6).

Progressive, antiwar, and ecologically minded voters who insist on exclusive loyalty to the Dems have acquiesced to their own demise as a political force. In his nomination speech, 2004 Green presidential candidate David Cobb called the Democratic Party "the graveyard of progressive ideals."

In a November 20 speech at the Harvard Kennedy School, James K. Galbraith, Vice President of Americans for Democratic Action, said, "The Democratic Party has become too associated with Wall Street. This is a fact. It is a structural problem. It seems to me that we as progressives need -- this is my personal position -- we need to draw a line and decide that we would be better off with an under-funded, fighting progressive minority party than a party marked by obvious duplicity and constant losses on every policy front as a result of the reversals in our own leadership."

When the obstacle to everything we stand for is two-party rule, there is no solution, no change of direction to be found within either of the two ruling parties.

Right now is the best time to reject business-as-usual. A majority of Americans have expressed dissatisfaction with a choice limited to two major parties (Sept. 17 Gallup poll). Millions of Democratic voters were so unmotivated that they stayed home on Nov. 2.

Coincidentally, most Americans also want an end to the wars, most disapprove of the Wall Street bailouts, and I'm willing to bet that most don't want their Social Security benefits slashed or turned into chips in the Wall Street casino. Most prefer more government involvement in health care, not less (AP poll, Sept. 26). In other words, most Americans side with alternative parties like the Greens on big issues.

Throughout American history, the most urgent ideas came from alternative parties: abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, the eight-hour workday and other workplace rights, Social Security, etc. In her nomination acceptance speech, 2008 Green vice-presidential candidate Rosa Clemente said, "The Green Party isn't an alternative. It's an imperative."

Time for a Voters' Revolt

Ending two-party dominance requires more than just a few more registrations and votes for a new party. This 'memo' is not a Green recruiting brochure. Nor is it an exhortation for exclusively voting Green in every election. Greens are not on every ballot, nor would I advise voting according to party without regard for candidates' qualifications.

Rather, it's an appeal for progressive, antiwar, pro-environmental voters, and anyone who cares about America's future to recognize the alternative party imperative, and to support that imperative however they can.

What we need, as a preliminary for the emergence of the Greens or any other alternative, is a popular voters' revolt against the rule of the Titanic parties (a phrase coined by Laura Wells, Green candidate for governor of California in 2010). It should be led by a coalition of alternative parties that have found themselves virtually shut out of the political system and the media, including Greens, Socialists, Libertarians, independents, and others, as well as Tea Partiers frustrated by their movement's absorption into the GOP and sympathetic Democrats and Republicans.

All of these camps can unite in coalition, without sacrificing their own political platforms, to set the framework for a voters' revolt. The first step for such a coalition would be a list of demands that presuppose no political ideology beyond a desire for clean and open elections, and which appeal to fair-minded voters regardless of party registration. Here are my recommendations:

A call to elect qualified candidates outside the two established parties to Congress, state legislatures, and other offices at local, state, and national levels.

Candidates' debate forums that include all candidates and abolition of the Commission on Presidential Debates (owned and run by the Democratic and Republican parties), based on the principle that voters have a right to know about all the names they'll see on the ballot and a right to vote for whichever candidates best represents their own interests and ideals, without a two-party limit.

Various election reforms, including Proportional Representation, Instant Runoff Voting (which offsets the danger that a minority party or independent candidate might 'spoil'), and other alternatives to at-large and winner-take-all elections; far-reaching campaign finance reforms; tamper-proof open-software computer voting machines; punishment for public officials who conspire to manipulate vote counts.

Passage of the MoveToAmend amendment, which would abolish corporate 'personhood' and overturn the Citizens United ruling.

Repeal of ballot-access laws in many states that hinder alternative parties and privilege Democrats and Republicans; for an outrageous example in one state, see "Some political parties remain outlaws in Pa." by Oliver Hall in The Philadelphia Inquirer.

Repeal of rules in some states that limit the number of candidates on the ballot to two in the general election (and fierce opposition in states where such rules have been proposed).

Rejection of the notion that voters must vote for candidates judged by polls or media commentators to be the most winnable, which reduces voting in elections to the level of betting on a horse race.

Organizers of the voters' revolt should remember that the villains are not the voters of any party, but the two-party hierarchy and the corporate paymasters, media, and debate sponsors who've used their influence to limit the range of allowable candidates and ideas.

Alternative parties are interested in the direction of our nation in the coming decades, unlike the Titanic parties, which can't see beyond their own rivalry. Democratic and Republican politicians are primarily worried about whether the pendulum will swing in their direction in the next election. A voters' revolt isn't only about the next election, it's about future generations and a hope that the rest of the 21st century won't be limited to two-party politics.

In most of today's media, the basic premises of corporate power and military aggression that underlie Democratic and Republican policy are seldom questioned. It's taken for granted that for-profit insurance companies must control health care and pad medical costs, that the US has a right to wage 'preventive war' against countries with which we're at peace (a doctrine that Eisenhower deplored and associated with Hitler), that government in a democracy exists to serve big business interests rather than the needs of the people, that consumption-driven industrial civilization can expand without limit in this century of global climate change. An alternative party movement will push dissenting ideas that question these premises into the public forum.

As James K. Galbraith said in his speech, "[W]e are heading now into a very dark time, so let's face it with eyes open. And if we must, let's seek leadership that shares our values, fights for our principles, and deserves our trust."

It'll take a few more election cycles before Greens and other alternative parties can achieve major party status nationally, but we must start now, by rejecting the two-party paradigm, by recognizing that the Democratic Party holds no future for progressives, and by laying the groundwork for a transformation of the US political landscape that's based on multiparty democracy.

Such a transformation will open a wide space for the Green vision of an America that acts according to principles of human rights and freedoms, economic fairness for everyone, peace, and the health of our planet.



**“The Green Party is no longer the alternative,
the Green Party is the imperative”
~ Rosa Clemente**