

Metcalf (D, Mont.) and others to limit the amount of farm losses that non-farmers could deduct from other income. That effort resulted only in some meaningless modifications of the Tax Reform Act of 1969. What is

needed now is more than a revision of the tax laws. There must be a broad commitment by the federal government to assist agricultural workers, rather than doctors, in becoming farm owners.

## Platform Populism

# Miami and the Seeds of Port Huron

## by Tom Geoghegan

*Beneath the reassuring tones of the politicians . . . is the pervading feeling that there simply are no alternatives, that our times have witnessed the exhaustion not only of utopias, but of any new departures as well.* —The Port Huron Statement, 1962

*And is it any wonder that the people are skeptical and cynical of the whole political process?* —The Democratic Platform, 1972

**Y**ou can't fool the GOP with any phony populism or New Politics. Their platform exposes the once-great Democratic Party bent on surrender abroad and "convulsive leftward lurches" at home, duped by a radical clique which would "scorn our nation's past and would blight its future." The only past that Republicans scorn, apparently, is "the nightmarish time" of the '60s, those bad old days of riots and Vietnam and radical social programs. Oddly enough, it seems Senator McGovern will mention very few such programs in his campaign this year. He preaches a sober book-keeper's radicalism, an almost passive reordering of priorities—one that takes away defense funds and supplements incomes.

But the Republicans are right to sense that their old rivals are groping for new targets, though they aren't quite sure what these might be. The Democrats as a party have given them few clues. With a morbid eye on Archie Bunker's vote, they are more concerned than ever to sound folksy, like all those farmers-cabbies-housewives they kept splicing into the dead air of their telethon last month in Miami. Even the platform—this year, for once, an important document—was a showpiece of populist zip. "For the People" rambles on for nine chapters, and though it does little more than repackage the Great Society grocery list, it tries in its new folk wisdom to sound restless with the nostrums of liberal reform. It hankers after the home-

grown, radical rhetoric of the 19th-century Populists and 20th-century Bull Moosers, but without finding much there it can use. Except for a swipe at the railroads (an anachronistic plank in the age of Amtrak), the main thrust of the 1892 platform of the People's Party was to encourage the people to keep their spare change. When the Populists pronounced that "wealth belongs to him who creates it," they could have been spouting either a Marxist theory of value or small-fry capitalist homiletics. The Populist obsession with liquidity extended even to their own pygmy governments: "All state and national revenues shall be limited to the necessary expenses of government, economically and honestly administered." We do not demean the radicalism of Tom Watson or Sockless Jerry Simpson by suggesting their limited value to the phrasemakers of the New Politics of the '70s.

Nor were the Progressives of 1912, the party of Herbert Croly and Herbert Hoover, a ready source of inspiration or direction for the Democrats in Miami Beach this year. Progressive broadsides against "invisible government" of special interests catch moods the Democrats wish to capture, but the Bull Moosers didn't have the feisty proletarianism of the New Politics. Apostles of referenda and primaries, the Progressives had a fairly elitist faith in "a new instrument of government" more likely to co-opt than destroy the big trusts. They were angry, aroused, and yet quaintly

confident that sound business methods could put the country aright.

The true ancestor of the Miami platform is still hidden in the closet—the SDS charter first drafted 10 years ago in Port Huron by Tom Hayden. With SDS today in disrepute, blasted even by the *new* New Left for being out of touch with “the people,” this kind of victory is hollow but always logical, with the radical left always running out of steam and the moderate left always running out of ideas.

In *A Populist Manifesto*, Jack Newfield and Jeff Greenfield jeer at SDS for slighting the “concrete economic interests” of working people (forgetting the Progressive Labor faction, which made a fetish of them) and for indulging their middle-class malaise. But Populism, narrowly defined as an attack on economic privilege, is what the Miami Beach Democratic platform rejects: the problems of the people are deeper than their concrete economic interests. “The people” of the 1972 platform are straight out of Port Huron—not the John Q. Publics or the aggrieved farmers reaching for their pitchforks but the alienated, the bored, the apathetic. There’s no biblical wrath here, the platform just delivers some old New Left rabbit punches: “the people are *skeptical*” of all platitudes; “the people are *cynical*” about promises. And the Democrats of 1972 will “speak to those doubts.” “No government can by itself restore the lost faith,” the platform modestly admits, for the people must struggle with a vast bureaucracy that is demoralizing. Impersonal, not authentic government, Port Huron called it. The party half-articulates the Port Huron challenge of turning liberal government into participatory democracy. No more cheap talk in Hayden’s platform about throwing the rascals out: the people are isolated from one another, they must be brought together into a community “as a means of finding meaning in personal life,” one that is “personally authentic.”

In its bolder passages, the Miami Beach platform takes a few small steps into the Rousseauistic future:

“What do the people want?”

“They want three things:

► They want a personal life that makes us all feel that life is worth living;

► They want a social environment whose institutions promote the good of all; and

► They want a physical environment whose resources are used for the good of all.”

Here may be the first campaign commitment of a major national party to soul-satisfying “authenticity.” At this point, the platform breaks for an interlude of new Populism, rejecting the dole and demanding law-and-order, but it then returns to this inchoate “right to full participation in government and the political process.” And how is this right to be exercised? Mainly through more quotas and primaries around election year, as if through some sort of McGovern-Fraser guidelines there could be popular takeover of a remote federal

machine. Port Huron called for “public groupings,” not groupings of representatives, which would help people make direct, primary decisions about even their personal lives. The Port Huron statement, however, did not resolve the tension this would create between a new radical individualism and a new popular sovereignty. The Democrats also ignore that dilemma, a platform being no place for dialectics.

But parties are at least expected to have programs to match their rhetoric. The Democrats just furrow their brows and say, “It is time now to rethink and reorder the institutions of this country so that everyone . . . can participate in the decision-making process inherent in the democratic heritage to which we aspire.” This is at best an ethic and at worst bombast.

Ironically, only the George Wallace Democrats made serious use of the old SDS rhetoric to criticize American institutions. Their minority report has a ruthless democratic thrust. It asks tough questions about judges who ignore Congress to make laws, Presidents who ignore Congress to make wars and bureaucrats who ignore Congress to “pursue abstract and artificial social theories.” It suggests Americans will have to sit down and write the social contract all over again. In contrast, the McGovern Democrats have no intention of letting participatory democracy undermine the constitutional status quo. For all the talk about personal fulfillment, their platform trails off into interest group liberalism—a few more welfare programs, a little more bargaining and dealing with tenant organizations, welfare rights groups, veterans, elderly, American Indians, consumers—but without any institutional reforms. In brief, the Democrats promise more old-left new deals in the language of the New Left, a tactic almost calculated to escalate apathy.

The danger of the Democratic platform (and its so-called “populist” rhetoric) is that by its explicit promise of social reintegration, it exploits the political potential of the “new anxieties” of private identity. It wants ordinary people to take more responsibility for complex social crises—without having any more power than they did before. Even if more politics were the cure for the distresses in our lives, the Democrats don’t seem to have the stomach to give real power to the people. The logic of participatory democracy, as the Wallace Democrats know, requires, for instance, a reshuffling of the judiciary to give the majority of people control over the root-and-branch issue in American politics—race—which David Broder has called the single issue with enough emotional punch to realign the parties.

**B**ut the courts are only one stumbling block to participatory democracy. The huge federal leviathan, which survived unscathed at Miami, is sure to compromise any new populist attack on economic privilege and corporate conspiracy. In our economy, the people’s government is not another policeman on the

block but the air which all big business must breathe. After a century of progressive effort, Washington is regulating and subsidizing and even drawing up the entire demand curve of many large firms. "Consumers, citizens and taxpayers constitute too diffuse and amorphous a group to compete in this league," Richard Posner wrote last fall in *Public Interest*. "The larger the role of government in the economy . . . the worse the problem of public powers employed for private ends will become." Though calling for tougher antitrust laws against big-business establishment, the Democratic platform accepts a federal establishment already too mammoth to work properly.

Thus, the New Democrats are caught between Hayden's world, where politics is expected to deal with the whole man and his sense of helplessness, and the Great Society, where a faceless bureaucracy indemnifies anyone or any group big enough to make trouble for it. The Democrats can't promise, like Wallace, to throw briefcases into the Potomac, nor will they tear down the *ancien régime* in the name of Port Huron. In place of genuine participation, then, the Democrats are left only with cant about truth-in-government, inspired by the Pentagon papers, and a cult of "sincereness" inspired by Ellsberg and McGovern himself. More than the war itself, the Pentagon papers have deflected radical Democrats into conspiracy theories and image politics. A bread-and-butter issue like tax reform now figures in their rhetoric as just a particularly good example of hypocrisy in high places.

Larry O'Brien told the Miami Beach convention that the Democrats would level with the people. But before you level, you must have something to level about. It may be fine to open up FBI files and close down army spy rings, but it is ludicrous to expect thousands of honchos at HEW and HUD to start "leveling" with the people when the Democrats return to power. The platform hails a new era of participatory democracy, but the politicians simply promise a new era of good feelings between the people and government.

**I**t may be that, bankrupt as it is of better ideas for fuller participation, the Democratic Party can do no more than incant the name of the people. I'd like to suggest, however, that there is still time to go through an almost discredited exercise in 18th-century political science: to think through the republican principles on which Americans founded their constitutional government, see how far we have strayed from them and whether and how we might return to them. The Miami platform rightly addresses popular distrust of those in public authority. But it ignores the first halting steps of Congress to reclaim its position as the central institution in federal government—so far the most dramatic response to the so-called "crisis of confidence." For the lessons of this crisis, whether its particular form be Vietnam or housing, are laid out not in the Pentagon papers but in *The Federalist Papers*.

The *Federalist* authors saw the United States as a republic, with government in the hands of delegates necessarily removed from the general citizenry. But they had a peculiarly modern concern for protecting the citizen from government tyranny and faction through a system of checks and balances. The genius of the document is that it was written to fend off monsters like "a standing army," not to mention a standing army bankrolled at \$80 billion per annum.

The *Federalist* authors assumed Congress would be a more popular representative institution than the presidency, if only because it had more people to represent the people. Today Congress may be the last institutional alternative to the civic ennui that the Miami platform indicts. Liberals have sneered at Congress, particularly the "popular" branch—the House—because they confuse legitimate institutions, which Congress is, with progressive institutions, which Congress often is not. To strengthen the legitimate representative character of the government we may have to sacrifice a little of its progressive character. For however frustrating, Congress is not impersonal or "inauthentic." It helps foster independent publics, voluntary and legitimate face-to-face relationships with agencies and bureaucrats. Institutional reform at this level would throw any issue into new relief. Poorly staffed and financed, Congress defers to the "experts." In every area of government, it has delegated too much decision-making to trade associations, private groups and public corporations that even the President cannot control. Though it is foolish to expect warm, meaningful relationships between the people and their federal agencies, it is not too much to expect these agencies to have precise standards to follow—and the setting of those is a legislative responsibility.

Should Congress begin again to hoard its authority, the Democrats might have to accept greater limits on presidential government. That would not be bad. They have put too much faith in the power of the FDRs and JFKs to pull the people into the political process. Presidential elections can educate and entertain, but they are not the vehicles by which the people debate and decide issues.

The Miami platform is faithful to the spirit of centralized government, content with the post-parliamentary stage which most Western liberal democracies have entered. Its New Left rhetoric of participation may evoke nostalgia for the old sense of group responsibility that Tocqueville saw in American life. It may be a half-conscious itch for a government by public discussion at the national level, for congressional leadership. But in place of such leadership, the platform talks plebiscites and presidential democracy. What the party did in Miami was turn the Port Huron statement on its head, thundering at the beast and then promising to feed it. The Wallace Democrats had a populist last word: "What this platform says is 'Government has failed—give us more government.'"

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