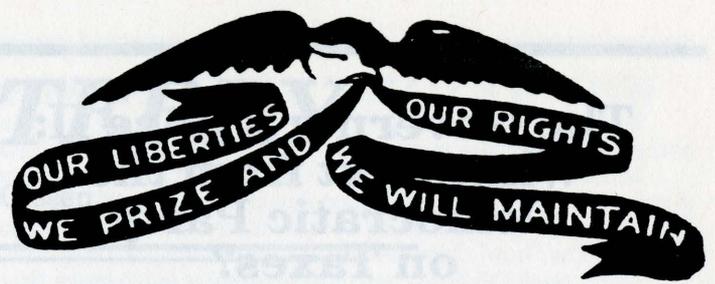


THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT



November 1989

Public Debate Frightens Council: *Commentary by Prairie Dog*

The art of public discourse is nearly dead.

This is no surprise to those who looked in vain for some public exchange of ideas and values during the last presidential campaign.

As the nation goes, so goes Iowa City. The current City Council appears to be dedicated to avoiding and discouraging any genuine public dialogue.

Councillor Karen Kubby collided with the Council's fear of open discussion last June. During a formal council meeting, mostly concerning a re-zoning to accommodate the Westport Plaza/Wal-Mart development, Kubby had the audacity to put labor issues on the table. When she suggested that corporate personnel practices were a legitimate topic for public discourse, councillor John Balmer reacted as if someone had maligned his mother's virtue. Jabbing a finger at Kubby, Balmer accused her of dredging up dark ideas that should be confined to private meetings and negotiations.

The usually affable councillor Darrel Courtney joined the attack, passionately proclaiming the council's prerogative not to discuss matters of concern to working men and women. (Mayor John McDonald lost control of the meeting, but Kubby managed to remain unflustered

during the melee; Balmer later apologized for the form, although not the content, of his outburst.)

An August Council meeting featured an even more garish display of contempt for public discourse.

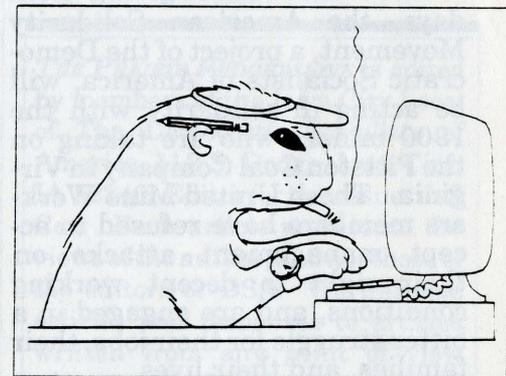
Downtown merchant Jim Clayton had just completed a civil, reasoned appeal to the Council, urging that the Westport development plan be cancelled. Courtney responded by praising Clayton's achievement of acquiring nearly 3000 signatures on a petition calling for a city-wide referendum on the issue. Courtney qualified his nod to civic participation by lamenting that these citizens should have expended their energy on something "positive for the community."

Remember George Bush's technique of questioning his opponent's patriotism, then quickly calling for an end to the mud-slinging? Well, Bill Ambrisco showed how it's done on the local level.

Ambrisco elevated the level of rhetoric by referring to Clayton as the "purported ring-leader." He offered to give a history lesson to other ring members, especially "those who have only been in the community a short time." Ambrisco denounced the signature gatherers

for "Council-bashing," "cheap shots," and "incendiary" language (he was especially irritated by the phrase "urban sprawl") Ambrisco's kinder, gentler nature finally got the best of him. Let's "try and keep personalities out of it," he intoned.

One of the beauties of Iowa City is its tradition of public give-and-take. Wal-Mart and labor unions are simply flash-points illuminating the real issue: this City Council seems more concerned with protecting the feelings of out-of-town developers than with promoting the democratic participation of its own constituents. Council members know that if they lose control of public debate, they might lose control of the city.



Coming in December:
Prairie Dog's Honor Roll
for 1989!

The Governor's Race II: What Next from the Democratic Party on Taxes?

by Jeff Cox

The five gubernatorial candidates are keeping quiet about taxes. With state revenues pouring in at a healthy rate, no candidate wants to commit political suicide by discussing taxes. When most voters hear the word "tax", they very reasonably think "tax increase".

Since the candidates are saying nothing about the subject, we are left on our own to figure out what to expect from a Democratic governor. The current state Democratic Platform is very clear: "We call for a shift of emphasis, at the local, state, and federal level, away from regressive taxes, such as sales, consumption, excise and property taxes, which disproportionately affect low and moderate income Americans, and support efforts to enact a progressive income tax at all levels." This is a fairly good statement of the views of the average Democratic Party activist. On this subject as many others, grass-roots Democrats hold admirable old-fashioned progressive views, and have yet to hear the news that the New Deal is dead.

Democratic activists are also afflicted with short memories, however, and an unwillingness to take a close look at the records of candidates they support. That is the only way to explain Dick Gephardt's widespread support among liberals around the state. Several of our gubernatorial candidates have a record on taxes, especially Don Avenson who was Speaker of the House in the 1980's when important changes were made in our tax code. Those changes bear hardly any resemblance to the recommenda-

tions of the Democratic platform.

Between 1983 and 1987 the Democratic leaders of the legislature cooperated with Governor Terry Branstad in a thorough regressive overhaul of our tax code. Democratic legislators raised taxes on the poor and working people, and reduced taxes on business and the wealthy. Among other things, they increased the sales tax, created a local option sales tax, broadened the base of the sales tax to include a number of items such as candy and pop purchased mainly by children, excluded agricultural and industrial machinery and equipment from the sales tax, excluded business inventories from the property tax, and instituted a new "birth tax" of \$10 per baby (my favorite). Having put new taxes on pop and candy and taken taxes off of combines, they then raised the regressive gasoline tax and lowered the top rate of income tax. About the only progressive victory of the eighties was the repeal of the park user fee which the Democratic legislature had earlier imposed.

A number of things can be said in defense of this miserable record. The state had to raise money from somewhere in order to keep its institutions running. With a Republican governor in place, no progressive changes were possible. The people of Iowa were demanding some action on economic development. But it would be interesting to know if we can expect more of the same if a Democrat is elected governor in 1990, and if any of the candidates will speak up now in favor of progressive taxes. Will Democratic activists, committed to progressive taxes, work hard to elect Don Avenson or JoAnn Zimmerman in 1990, and then be told in the spring of 1991 that there is no alternative to another increase in sales tax? Or that David Stanley and his Iowans for Tax Relief organization are so powerful that no progressive income tax reform is possible, even with a Democratic governor and a Democratic majority in the legislature?

DSA SUPPORTS STRIKING COAL MINERS IN VIRGINIA

Over the Thanksgiving holidays, the American Solidarity Movement, a project of the Democratic Socialists of America, will be acting in solidarity with the 1900 miners who are taking on the Pittston Coal Company in Virginia. These United Mine Workers members have refused to accept management attacks on their right to decent working conditions, and are engaged in a bitter struggle for their jobs, their families, and their lives.

They have invited friends and sympathizers to come to Virginia to witness the on-going violations of human rights by the State of

Virginia and its Democratic governor. DSA plans to organize several hundred members and friends in a caravan to Camp solidarity in southwestern Virginia starting Wednesday evening, November 22d, through Sunday morning, November 25th. DSAers will also be carrying down dried and canned foods and turkeys for the strikes, and for the UMWA retirees whose pensions and medical benefits have been suspended by Pittston Coal.

If you would like to attend, or if you can make a contribution to the "Justice for Pittston Miners Fund", call Jeff Cox at 338-4551.

ICAN WORKS FOR "HEALTH CARE FOR ALL"

The HEALTH CARE FOR ALL campaign will continue to be the priority of the Iowa Citizen Action Network in the coming year.

Has the private insurance system failed you? Are you unable to afford insurance? Are you ineligible for insurance due to a health problem? ICAN needs to hear your story! Call Jay Larson at (515) 244-9311.

DIXON TERRY

by Susan Olesen

On May 28, 1989, on his farm east of Greenfield, Iowa, on the crest of a hill, Dixon Terry went to another place via lightning. "A cosmic exit for a cosmic man," mused his friend Jay Howe. His passing was noted in The Adair County Free Press, The Des Moines Register, The Chicago Tribune, The New York Times, CNN, and a host of other news organizations. Resolutions praising his work were offered in both houses of the United States Congress. Republicans, Democrats, and the nonpolitical sang his praises.

But the din has died. The vacancy on the Adair County Democratic Central Committee from Harrison Township has been filled. The Iowa Farmers' Union has found a new vice-president. The National Family Farm Coalition of which Dixon was national president has new leadership. His offices above Crook's Clothing on the Greenfield Town Square and in Washington, D.C., have been emptied and cleaned. His wife Linda, his children, and his parents struggle to move ahead without him.

In Adair County there is a void — an immeasurable sense of loss. Last fall at a friend's annual Halloween Party he danced for the first time. We marveled at his trepidation and thrill over so minor an accomplishment — he who shaped national opinion proclaimed he had done it — he had danced! This fall the Halloween party is a less anticipated event, looming all too soon to remind us of our loss. Last fall at our biannual Adair County Democratic fundraiser, Dixon presented Jay Howe with an award for his service to the Democratic Party. He was so full of life and humor that night. He enveloped Jay in his strength and demonstrated to him and to all of us the bond he felt for his home. He was surprised at the emotion he stirred and said he was just glad to be giving Jay the award — he who was more often in the uncomfortable position of recipient.

Jay wonders who will tell us what's right. Dixon's amazing intellect was enhanced by the self-awareness that hard physical labor and intellectual exercise balance one another. While his dreams were often high minded and ambitious, his feet were firmly planted in the soil of real life and real politics. This allowed him to argue credibly for his ideals and offer realistic methods to accomplish them. This balance and good sense also afforded his friends and supporters the luxury of being able to trust his judgement. Not that we didn't argue with him, but his beliefs were so steeped in historical perspective, carefully thought through, and democratic, that it was a rare occasion when he was not persuasive.

His dedication to the struggle to maintain quality rural life was unique. He farmed without chemicals in an age when that practice was unheard of. He sacrificed the thing he held most dear — time with his family — in the hope that he would help assure a stable, healthy future for rural America. While his family kept the home fires burning and the farm-work done and his friend Bruce Espe kept the milk cows empty, he traveled widely several weeks a month to become one of the most eloquent spokespersons to come out of rural America in some time. He was a complicated man who understood as clearly as anyone the forces that move people and the world. Though he hated being gone from his family, I think he was challenged by his associations with so many diverse ideas and groups. However, I think he would've given up his public role in a second if he had known our future in rural America was secure and his children could choose this life if they wished.

We miss him in Adair County. We miss his intensity, his humor, his counsel, his ideas. We miss his ability to gently let us down when we become too full of ourselves. We miss seeing

his rusty pick-up truck on the square in front of his office and that sense that there was hope for positive change because Dixon was taking care of business. He brought the world to us and we wonder how we will sustain our commitment without his leadership and his example.

His staggering debt load was a shock to most of his friends. It must have caused him and Linda untold anxiety and sleepless nights. We didn't see that worry or maybe we chose not to see his personal worry through his public concern for other struggling farm families. The debt, however, lingers on and now belongs to all of us who share his dream for Adair County and other places like it. Will this farm be saved? Or will Dixon's personal and political dreams go the way of the auction block?

Though he is gone, I think what he left for us is clear. He helped us to believe that who we are and what we have are worth fighting for. We dishonor his memory if we give up because he isn't around to fight for us. It is time to renew our commitment to a quality, healthy life in rural America. Thank you, Dixon, for showing us the way.

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Labor donated.

WHY WE CAN'T STOP TALKING ABOUT "DO THE RIGHT THING"

Spike Lee wanted his movie *Do The Right Thing* to provoke thought about racism in America. That it has. It has been called everything from "the movie of the decade" to "racist" and "fascist".

In his production diary Lee writes "what if a racial incident like Howard Beach or the Edmund Perry and Eleanor Bumpers murders had happened on the hottest day of the summer?" *Do The Right Thing* takes place on the hottest day of the summer. So a riot, the "what", is a given, and questions of motivation and culpability and who is and is not a racist are academic in the tinder box of racial tension. The "how" then becomes all-important, the way Lee chooses to present his view of racism to the country.

There seems to be an assumption among moviegoers that there is a linear progression from the title, "*Do The Right Thing*", to the riot, and, finally, to the ending quote from Malcolm X advocating violence as self-defense. This has led to much discussion about Mookie as the catalyst to the riot, and may have cost *Do The Right Thing* the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival.

Mookie is the movie's central character, carrying Sal's pizzas, and the dialectical development of the story, through a maze of dichotomies, all linked to the theme of racism, and all presenting alternative possibilities. Some critics have complained that Lee's dichotomies are too obvious and simplistic. Many, such as a black character wearing Magic Johnson's jersey and a white Larry Bird's, are very obvious, as obvious as, say, black and white.

Obvious, perhaps, but certainly not simplistic. The dichotomies even exist within a single character. Pino, clearly a racist and the only character approaching a classic villain, has black cultural heroes. And during the riot, Mother Sister is seen screaming "Burn it down!" one moment and shown lost in a horrifying primal scream at the futility of it all the next.

Love-hate is the most persistent and powerful dichotomy. Mister Senior Love Daddy, the DJ at We Love radio, is given the first and last word in the movie. But he is behind glass, from where he can only observe the action, comment on it, and admonish the community to be cool and love one another. Smiley's photos of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X appear to hold the promise of a synthesis. But Smiley stutters and cannot articulate their meaning.

The movie's final dichotomy is property versus life. Mookie possibly saves Sal's life at the end by diverting hostility from him to his property. The destroyed pizzeria has become the focus of too many critics who overlook Radio Raheem's death. We white Americans respond so easily to the shattered values of the hardworking, self-made man that Sal voices with such passion. It is apparently harder to feel the tragedy of the less verbal Radio Raheem, in whose young life love was struggling to conquer hate.

Spike Lee has indeed got his audience thinking and talking about racism. How much talk would there be about the movie, however, if everything were tidily resolved at the end? History has shown that America responds more readily to riots, which threaten property, than to reason. The controversy over this film is further proof of that.

In defense of the ending Lee simply says "Black folks are tired of being killed." He also says that black audiences are starving for films by and about them. Which points to another overwhelming tragedy that this movie brings home with such force—that African-American culture, so rich in every way but the American way, is kept a close secret by the Hollywood establishment.

by Jae Retz

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Joe Bolkcom
and *Rick Graf*
for City Council
on November 7,
and to vote "yes"
on the zoning
referendum
(= "no" to WAL-MART).**