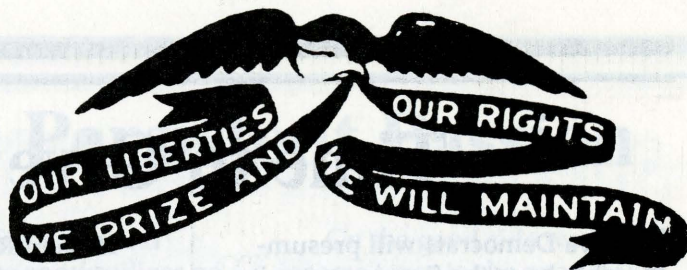


THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



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Summer 1994

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Prairie Dog's Fifth Annual Summer Reading List

The Shipping News by E. Annie Proulx. An American misfit takes his fractured family to Newfoundland, where he discovers more misfits, the terror and beauty of the Atlantic coast, and love. A free *PP* subscription goes to the first reader who can identify the "woman from Iowa City" on page 125.

Alone with the President by John Strasbaugh. Photos of Carter & Warhol, JFK & Ann-Margret, LBJ & Eartha Kitt glaring at each other, Ford with Flip Wilson in drag, Nancy Reagan in Mr. T's lap, Nixon & Elvis, and every one of them—alas—with Bob Hope.

Breath, Eyes, Memory by Edwidge Danticat. A Haitian girl is left behind when her mother is forced to flee. Now 25, she weaves a powerful tale of life in Haiti, four generations of the women she loves, and reunion with her mother in the US.

The Angolite. Written and edited by inmates of the Louisiana State Penitentiary, each bi-monthly issue depicts in vivid prose a world most of us can't comprehend: real prisoners, real violence, real deaths. Give a subscription to someone who still thinks capital punishment has a place in civilized society. (\$12, Louisiana State Prison, Angola, LA 70712.)

The Archie McPhee Catalog. The Seattle-based "Outfitters of Popular

Culture" offer potato guns, rubber chickens, boxing nuns ("fighting for what's right!"), plastic eyeballs, and obscure remnants from your own strange childhood. Late-stage capitalism at its zaniest.



Red Hunting in the Promised Land: Anticommunism & the Making of America by Joel Kovel.

A brilliant examination of the pathologic obsession that dominates the country's psyche. Somehow, that which tears us apart also binds us together.

Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice & Communities of Color by Robert Bullard. How environmental protection laws perpetuate racial and economic discrimination—and how victims retaliate.

Confessions of a Union Buster by Martin Levitt. Induces the same reaction as reading an expose of the

CIA: everything you thought you knew turns out to be true.

Fly in the Buttermilk by Cecil Reed. Life story of the only African-American Republican to serve in the Iowa House.

The Politics of Privatization: Public It's Ours, Private It's Theirs by Laurie Clements. Why it's increasing, and how to fight it. Order a copy from the U of I Labor Center and say you're a *PP* subscriber for a special discount.

Cracking the Corporate Closet by Daniel Baker & Sean Strub. Groundbreaking study of corporate America's policies and attitudes on gay and lesbian issues. Reveals the companies that provide domestic partner benefits, the ones that have nondiscrimination policies, and the ones you never want to work for.

Jim Crow Guide: The Way It Was by Stetson Kennedy. A searing reminder of the grip that segregation had on our not-so-distant past. Written in mock travel-guide style, this portrait of American apartheid should be mandatory reading in every high school.

Tikkun edited by Michael Lerner. The magazine that provided Bill & Hillary with their "politics of meaning" rhetoric. Let's hope they mean it. ☛

Time to Give Up on Clinton?

Iowa Democrats will presumably have the first opportunity in the nation in the 1996 caucuses to pronounce on the success or failure of the Clinton Administration. The circumstances might resemble those of 1980. Although conventional wisdom is firmly wedded to the proposition that left-wing views are a political liability, both Clinton and Carter demonstrate the perils of governing from the center of the political spectrum. Like Clinton, Carter was misgoverning the nation from the middle of the road, bringing his party to new depths of unpopularity. Like Clinton, Carter had nothing but contempt for the left wing of his own party, which he took every opportunity to ignore or insult. Like Clinton, Carter had no sense of identity with working people, but governed the nation as an impartial policy expert looking for a way to transcend the special interests of both parties.

Columnists in *The Nation* and *Democratic Left* have suggested recently that leftists are too critical of the Clinton Administration. Their arguments are familiar ones: Clinton is not as bad as Bush; any Republican elected in 1996 will be much worse than Clinton; Clinton is a strong supporter of abortion rights. The *Wall Street Journal* and Rush Limbaugh treat the Clinton Administration as ultra-liberal or even socialist. These familiar lesser-evil arguments have their merits, and they will no doubt come into play in the next general election. But it seems unrealistic to expect the left to come to the rescue of the Clinton Administration unless Clinton wants our support, or gives us some positive reason to support him. What are the achievements and aspirations of this administration?

Human Rights: Clinton has carried through one of the fundamental policy goals of the Bush Administration, normalizing our trading relationships with the world's largest prison, the People's Republic of China.

NAFTA: Another Bush priority, pushed through by Clinton with a particularly insulting campaign against the labor movement. The days when labor organizers could put a picture of FDR on the wall over the slogan "The President Wants You to Join the Union", are obviously nowhere in sight.

Three Strikes and You're Out: Another Bush priority, a crime bill which will further pack our prisons, is sailing through Congress with Clinton as its most important cheerleader. The crime bill takes a giant step toward the federalization of the criminal law, removes the one serious barrier (fiscal) to the further expansion of the nation's prison population, and shifts federal resources away from health, education, and welfare into the housing of a larger and larger percentage of Americans behind bars. It could well be the single worst piece of legislation passed under the Reagan, Bush and Clinton administrations.

Two Years and Off to Work: This phrase is not directed at those in receipt of rent, interest, dividends, and capital gains, but reflects yet another Bush/Clinton priority. The singling out of welfare mothers, and subjecting them to a series of humiliating restrictions and punishments, is the heart of Clinton's welfare reform as it is of every other welfare reform on the table. The most accurate phrase for this is sexual harassment, carried out by the government without a peep of

protest (to my knowledge) from any major feminist organization.

The Supreme Court: Stephen Breyer was closely associated with two debacles of the 1980s, deregulation of our nation's oligopolies and, what is worse, the craze for mandatory minimum sentences in our federal courts. The first helped turn hundreds of thousands of working people into the working poor. The second has produced a hapless population of 20,000 small-scale drug offenders serving sentences ranging from 5 to 40 years in our federal prisons with no hope of parole.

Health Care: The jury is still out on this one. Support for universal coverage is overwhelming; the time is exactly right for a Democratic president to push through national health insurance, which Germans have had since 1881 and the British since 1911. Clinton has promised to veto any bill that fails to deliver universal coverage. Why is it that no one in Congress seems to believe him?

Because of his worship of celebrity, power, and expertise, Clinton has crafted a bill which threatens to make national health insurance unpopular. Acceptable to the biggest insurance companies and to policy experts, it has been abandoned by the big business supporters that Hilary Rodham Clinton has courted so expertly. Under fierce attack from Republicans, the administration is utterly incapable of rallying progressive Democrats in a class-based appeal for universal coverage. Only supporters of the rational, simple, and fair alternative, the McDermott-Wellstone single payer bill, have been loyal to a Clinton bill they do not like, but the Clinton

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Administration has been openly insulting to that constituency.

Health care aside, Clinton's achievements and aspirations closely resemble those of the Bush Administration. He has, as of yet, nothing to his credit as impressive as the Americans with Disabilities Act, which Bush at least signed. He did appoint Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Janet Reno and Jocelyn Elders and has yet to get us involved in a land war in Asia or the Balkans. He is without a doubt a lesser evil than almost any imaginable Republican alternative. Perhaps we can't do any better.

But in a country with civil liberties under attack, with tax money pouring into a massive prison construction program, with inner cities rotting and working people slipping into poverty, with political apathy threatening to make a mockery of democracy while investors prosper and the powerful grow more powerful, it's not clear that lesser-evilism is enough.

Not all widely believed slogans about electoral politics are true, but this one is: you can't beat somebody with nobody. There is no Kennedy or Cranston or Jackson or Simon around to represent progressive constituencies in the party. Paul Wellstone faces a tough campaign for re-election; Bernie Sanders is not a Democrat; Tom Harkin is arguing with Bill Clinton about who can be tougher on poor women and their children. If health care reform goes entirely astray, and Clinton appears headed for a Carter-style electoral disaster, progressive leadership might emerge. For now, all we can do is make clear that such leadership is necessary for the health of the nation, and welcome at our precinct caucus. ☛

— Jeff Cox

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Terry's Used Cars and Florida Real Estate. State agents would sell such items as crippled school buses, property seized from drug busts (cocaine, machine guns), and waterfront vacation properties.

The state's creative approach to economic development would have become even more inspired with passage of the Job Creationism bill. Under this piece of legislation, the next time a major plant proposed to locate or expand in the state, or threatened to leave, instead of bargaining away precious local tax dollars, the state would simply grant the firm a license to engage in some otherwise illegal activity—corporate ownership of farmland, or slot machines in the employee lounge, for example. IPSCO could have been granted the East Central Iowa Loan Sharking Franchise, instead of a property tax exemption. Not only would this have saved tax dollars, it would have created more jobs—in loan sharking, debt collection and related enterprises. Some supporters of this bill suggested that the state should even consider making illegal some currently legal activities, to make sure we don't run out of financial inducements to new firms, or props to failing enterprises like race tracks.

On the social policy front, one senator was shocked to learn that recipients of a certain housing subsidy program were having more children after enrolling in the program, necessitating purchase of a larger house and thereby triggering a larger taxpayer subsidy. He introduced a bill that would cut off benefits whenever this happened, unless the recipients agreed to be sterilized. However, upon learning that the housing subsidy involved was actually the homeowner deduction for mort-

gage interest and property taxes, he withdrew the bill.

The most ambitious piece of legislation that didn't quite make it was a sweeping reform of the way state and local government services are provided and financed. Under this bill, all state government services after FY 1995 would be provided instead by local governments, under mandates from the state. To make sure tax-and-spend liberals in local government didn't respond by raising local taxes, the property tax would be abolished. The state legislature henceforth would convene only to pass new mandates and make sure no one was levying any taxes. Legislators were excited by the election year possibilities. The sponsor of the bill crowed: "We told you it was possible for the state to cut taxes while maintaining services."

One hapless freshman Democrat introduced a bill that would have funded fifty new positions in the enforcement divisions of the state environmental and labor agencies, on the grounds that the state should make a serious effort to enforce the environmental and worker safety laws that it passes. He proudly noted that his bill would create jobs and that it would be financed by a progressive tax increase. The poor fellow was justly ridiculed for failing to understand two basic principles (1) Government Jobs Don't Count, and (2) Government financing in the '90s should be based on sound business principles, like selling people something they don't need, not on outmoded ideas like "fairness." He was so chagrined, he promptly resigned from the legislature, so we won't have to listen to any of his hare-brained ideas next year. ☛

— Peter Fisher is an associate professor and folksinger

Speed and Roots: Filmed in Hollywood and Made in Iowa

"If you ain't Dutch, you ain't much."

— Pella bumpersticker

"If you ain't got roots, you ain't worth a hoot."

— Iowa mindset

Not since the Gulf War were so many Americans chained to their television sets, watching a police-escorted vehicle move along an L.A. freeway. Inside was fallen sports hero O.J. Simpson. Two other vehicles moving across the American landscape have also made their imprint on our consciousness—one carrying a movie cop who won't quit until he's got his man, the other containing a governor who, after three terms, still won't quit. The first is the L.A. bus wired with explosives in the summer hit *Speed*. The other is Terry Branstad's "Made-in-Iowa" campaign bus in the form of an Iowa-made Winnebago.

Speed is the opening blast in a long line of summer movies highlighting explosives. For society's sake we must hope that they all bomb. (How do we explain the male delirium over explosions? I suspect it has something to do with the phenomenon of ejaculation.)

The movie bus has no governor—it must maintain a speed above 50 mph or it will explode. The Winnebago had a governor seeking re-election, so it had to maintain a moderate speed for fear it might upset its reactionary vacuum and implode.

There are some similarities. Both are commandeered, but not driven, by men with a very limited emotional range: from perturbed to

perplexed (Keanu Reeves) and from smug to arrogant (Terry Branstad). Each has fooled the public: the one, that he can act; the other, that he can govern. Before the movie bus has to make a high speed turn, Reeves yells: "Everybody get to the right side of the bus." In the Winnebago, of course, everybody is already on the right.

There are also several meaningful differences between *Speed* the movie and Winnebago the political reality. While the speed is fixed for the bus and the route is whatever works, both speed and course for the Republican Winnebago were set 12 years ago. The movie is totally preposterous, the Branstad campaign entirely predictable. Reeves is your prototypical cinematic smart ass. Iowa teachers will attest that the governor is not so smart, asking for a second endorsement from them after breaking his promise of a pay raise the first time.

The bus spends some time on a suspended freeway; the Winnebago never strayed from the low road. And the bus has several people of color aboard. The Winnebago probably not.

The "roots" of this scenario are not to be confused with Alex Haley's celebrated story of his African ancestors. From these roots grows a white lily, or, more accurately, a lily white Iowan. And it's Iowa's fixation on roots—maybe even more than gender—that stands in the way of Bonnie Campbell's bid to take over the wheel of the Bus of State.

Branstad exploited the roots mentality to run his primary opponent's campaign vehicle off the road. You see, Fred Grandy's campaign motor home was made in

Indiana. So was Mark Smith of the Iowa Federation of Labor, who argued in a letter to the *Des Moines Register* that **choosing** to live in Iowa should rate as much as an "accident of birth."

Even growing up on a farm wasn't enough for Bonnie Campbell, because the farm was in New York, not Iowa. So she chose Leonard Boswell as her running mate, who brings to the ticket the crucial made-in-Iowa ingredient plus (the Iowa Peace Institute be damned) a War Record.

Samuel Johnson had his Boswell, now Bonnie Campbell has hers.

Even if Campbell takes over the Bus of State, will she pick up the speed and get into the passing lane? Not according to the "Mainstream the Democratic Platform" flyer circulated by her people at the State Democratic Convention. In it, delegates were urged to oppose planks on issues like same-sex marriage, non-traditional partnerships, decriminalizing drugs, and no new prison construction.

In honor of Tipper Gore, sainted censor of rock lyrics and featured speaker at the convention, and with apologies to The Who—we have to ask: will we be singing in November "Here's the new bus, just like the old bus?" 🐦

— Jae Retz

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE has been published quarterly since 1986. Send subscriptions (\$5) and correspondence to:
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David Osterberg's Persistent Passion

The following remarks were made at a May Day celebration and tribute to Representative Osterberg in Iowa City on May 1, 1994.

Thank you for this tribute to my years in the legislature. When one decides to stop a job that he has enjoyed and decides to go on to other things, there is always the possibility that in a year or so, the decision to quit will not seem to make sense. It is possible I will regret quitting.

Dorothy Parker wrote a poem describing this phenomena:

Why is it when I am in Rome,

I'd give my eye to be at home,

But when on native earth I be,

My heart is sick for Italy.

And why, with you, my Love, my Lord,

Am I spectacularly bored?

Yet let you up and leave me—then,

I scream to have you back again.

I do wonder if I will continue to feel good about my decision to quit—and I think part of that wondering is that not a lot of people in the Iowa legislature would describe themselves as progressives or even liberals.

Even with so few progressives, some good laws have passed. The question I want to address is this. Are there things that have been accomplished in my 12 years in the Iowa legislature that a member of the Labour Party or a Social Democrat in Sweden or even a Green in any part of Europe would call progressive legislation?

From 1985-90 Iowa was a leader in the nation on environmental policy. People in other states met this news with a bit of disbelief, but it was true.

Iowa took an approach to funding environmental programs with funds outside of the General Fund. Taxes on solid waste pay for recycling; a small part of the electric and gas utilities bills go to

support energy efficiency; and taxes on pesticides and fertilizer go to support the sustainable agriculture efforts which are saving Iowa farmers at least \$50 million per year.

We set up alternative institutions outside of state government. We did this so that when the time came that the progressives in the House and Senate couldn't muster the votes, there would be a constant, well-funded environmental voice. We created a lot of Institutes and Centers including the:

- Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture
- Center for the Health Effects of Environmental Contamination
- Iowa Waste Reduction Center
- Center for Global Climate Change
- Iowa Energy Center
- Bioethics Committee at ISU
- Center for Agricultural Safety and Health

I believe the "polluter pays" method of funding environmental programs and creating institutions at the state universities constitutes progressive legislation.

We in this room are all dedicated to making the state's tax system more progressive. When I came to the legislature in 1983, Iowa had a 3% sales tax; today it has a 5% sales tax. That is certainly not progress.

Worse, Iowa dropped the highest marginal tax bracket in the Iowa income tax to 9.9% from 12%. We also kept a variant of special capital gains treatment when the federal government got rid of theirs in the 1986 tax reform. We gave business a \$50 million dollar per year tax cut by removing the sales taxes on parts and repairs of equipment especially farm equipment. These changes were also not progressive.

On the good side we did cut income taxes to the poor. Tax-payers in Iowa must earn at least \$13,500 for a family or \$9000 for a single person before they must pay income tax.

Another benefit for some low income people was to reduce their property tax. A low-income elderly person's local property tax is paid in part by state government. If one's income is less than \$6000 from all sources, the state will pay the local county treasurer all property tax owed on a home, up to a maximum of \$1000. Renters also get a check for the property tax portion of their rent the year after they pay it. Partial payments are made for people with higher incomes, topping out at 25% of property tax for incomes between \$12,000 and \$14,000. The legislature twice increased this credit, called the low income elderly circuit breaker, while I was there.

More important, in 1990, we passed a law that gives this same credit to low income people who are not elderly. However, the Governor has never funded the law even though he promised to do so in the big tax agreement after two special sessions in 1992.

So that's it for progressive legislation that I can take any credit for. We have people still in the legislature who will try to protect the gains on the environment and who will try to make taxes more progressive.

People in the Iowa legislature are not long remembered. I hope I'm remembered for those things that would make a true left delegate somewhere say, "Well that legislation wasn't so bad for a small midwestern state in America." ☘

Some Bills that Almost Made it

As we reflect upon the 1994 Iowa legislative session, we should pause to take note of some significant, but little known, bills that almost made it out of committee. They provide important insight into what we can look forward to in 1995.

Following the success of gambling legislation, several bills were drafted to build on the principles underlying the lottery and casino gambling as a way to finance government. One notable example would have combined prison reform with revenue enhancement by creating a new work-release program for prisoners in minimum-security installations. Selected inmates would fan out across the state, stationing themselves in supermarket parking lots where they would engage in various scams designed to bilk little old

ladies out of their life savings. Working on commission, each revenue-enhancement agent would be expected to bring in several hundred thousand dollars per year to the state. In the process, they would be undergoing a kind of rehabilitation and on-the-job training, increasing the likelihood that they could become permanently employed in legitimate occupations, such as life insurance salesmen, upon release from prison, saving the state future incarceration costs.

A brilliant proposal by a prominent Quad Cities legislator would have increased revenues from riverboat gambling taxes and from cigarette taxes simultaneously. On the back of one out of every 100 state cigarette tax stamps (placed on each carton of ciga-

rettes), would be a coupon good for one free cruise on a riverboat and \$50 in gambling tokens. With sufficient advertising by the state, this promotion should stimulate purchases of cigarettes by gamblers and entice more smokers to try their luck at the slot machines. Hopefully, folks would become as hooked on gambling as they are on cigarettes (and vice-versa), providing the state with a more secure source of future revenues.

Some other creative efforts are worth noting. A legislator from Dubuque, for example, inspired by the Bishop's Annual Appeal, proposed a Governor's Annual Chain Letter. And a representative from Des Moines proposed opening a network of publicly-owned retail outlets across the state called Crazy

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Passion, Politics, and Prairie Dog's Summer Reading List

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