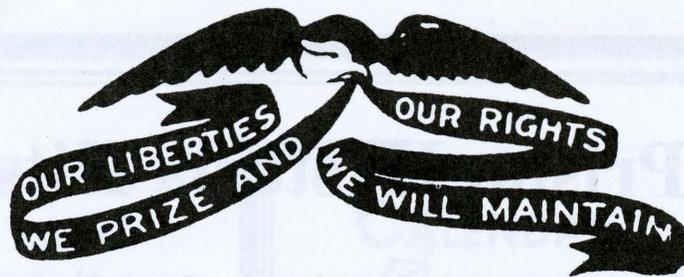


# THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



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Spring 1996

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

## Business as Usual in Johnson County

### Harvey, We Hardly Knew Ye

Republican Harvey Wehde announced last fall that he would raise \$50,000 in his campaign for the Johnson County Board of Supervisors. A self-proclaimed fiscal conservative, Wehde bragged that he would bring greater cost-efficiency to county government.

The Coralville businessman made more news by hosting a party fundraiser at which Terry Branstad and State Senator Maggie Tinsman endorsed three candidates in the nonpartisan Iowa City City Council race. Wehde, the Press-Citizen, and embarrassed local Republicans fell all over each other with contradictory denials and explanations.

Wehde's glorious foray into the electoral arena ended in March. His withdrawal from the race created more embarrassment, this time for incumbent Democratic supervisors Charlie Duffy and Don Sehr, whom Wehde deemed worthy of his support.

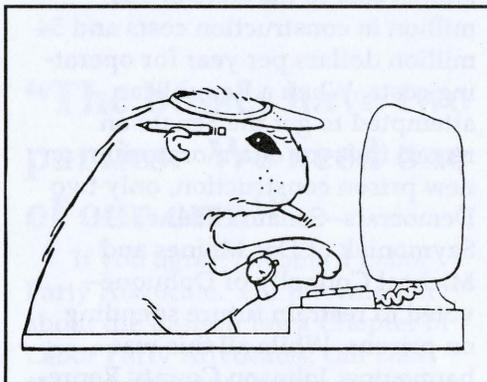
It's too bad that Wehde's campaign was a flash in the pan. We'll miss his entertaining blend of strutting self-promotion, small-fry capitalism, and inadvertent honesty. At least he admits he's a Republican.

### Where You Stand Depends on Where You Sit

One of the candidates endorsed at the aforementioned Wehde wingding was Dean Thornberry, who

went on to knock Bruno Pigott off the Council.

Thornberry's campaign emphasized his businessman's decisiveness. Pigott was charged with vacillation and changing his mind too much.



By Prairie Dog's count, Thornberry changed his vote, or voted differently than his earlier comments indicated, at least five times in his first three months in office. His most notable turnabout was on councillor Larry Baker's suggestion to consolidate the city and county assessors' offices. Thornberry, who fancies himself a fiscal conservative like Wehde, at first was all for eliminating a layer of bureaucracy. A few weeks later, he voted against further study of Baker's cost-efficient idea.

The pre-election Thornberry had criticized Pigott and the rest of the Council for their decisions on the new water treatment plant. The

post-election Thornberry now defends most of the city's water plans.

What else has the Burger King magnate been up to? Well, he declared his annoyance with the city's practice of stating the gender configuration of boards and committees when vacancies are announced. "That grates on my nerves," he said.

Thornberry's delicate sensibilities were also offended by gender-neutral language. His was the lone vote against a motion by Karen Kubby to eliminate phrases such as "man-made" from an environmental ordinance.

In addition to enduring such insensitivity among his colleagues, Thornberry also must put up with impertinent questions from them. Baker: "So you're saying you're in favor of tax abatement for businesses but not for low-income housing?" Thornberry: "To be blunt...yes."

### Top Ten Reasons to be a County Supervisor

10. You get to appoint your wife to boards.
9. You don't have to have your septic tank inspected.
8. Free food at receptions and open houses.

*Business as Usual,  
continued on Page 6*

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# Prison Hysteria Hits the Iowa Legislature

**I**t is dawning on large numbers of people that we cannot continue to build more and more prisons indefinitely. The facts about the massive increase in the numbers of prisoners are well known. The costs of incarceration are well known. The racist pattern of punishment and incarceration is well known. The futility of the war on drugs is becoming more widely accepted.

None of this appears to have much effect on legislators or public officials. The Iowa legislature has gone down the road of tougher penalties and more prisons, even while legislators acknowledge that what they are doing makes no sense.

What is striking both nationally and locally is the extent to which Democrats are taking the lead in appropriating money for more prisons at the expense of education, environmental programs, transportation, and housing. President Clinton has made the funding of federal and state prisons a central legislative priority, and has done battle with Republicans who wish to cut back on some of the more expensive provisions of the 1984 Crime Bill. Senator Tom Harkin has a long history of crusading against drugs, and strongly supported the Clinton crime bill. Bonnie Campbell made new prison construction a centerpiece of her disastrous campaign for governor.

In the Iowa legislature new prison construction is driven by enhanced penalties for crimes, particularly the "mandatory minimum" sentences that sharply limit the ability of judges to exercise discretion in sentencing. On one recent key vote establishing "mandatory minimums" for a variety of violent crimes (HF 2104), Johnson

County Democrats Mary Mascher and Dick Myers voted yes. Minnette Doderer deserves a great deal of credit for standing up to the pack mentality of the House, and voting no.

A comparable bill (SF 2114) passed the Senate on the astonishing vote of 50-0. According to an analysis of the consequences of that bill by the Legislative Service Bureau, Johnson County Democratic Senators Mary Neuhauser and Bob Dvorsky voted to add 3064 new inmates over the next 20 years. That will require the construction of, not just one, but four new medium security prisons at an annual cost to the state of 138 million in construction costs and 54 million dollars per year for operating costs. When a Republican attempted to get the Senate on record in favor of a moratorium on new prison construction, only two Democrats--Senator Elaine Szymoniak of Des Moines and Michael Connolly of Dubuque--voted to restrain future spending on prisons. While all this was happening, Johnson County Representative Mary Mascher and Senator Bob Dvorsky were complaining to the press that the Oakdale prison in Coralville is understaffed, and needs urgent funding for more prison guards.

But the striking thing about this surge of knee-jerk pro-prison voting is the extent to which those members of the public who have grave doubts about more prisons are disenfranchised. It's true that there is a great deal of public support for new prisons. At the same time disquiet about incarceration is not a marginal view confined to a few activists, but very widespread throughout the country. Yet liberal Democrats are not

merely agreeing to new prisons; they are taking the lead in seeing that they are built.

This is not the only issue where liberal and progressive Americans are locked into an "abusive relationship" with Democratic party leaders and elected officials. The labor movement is even more pro-Clinton now than it was four years ago, even though Clinton took on and defeated the entire labor movement over NAFTA. It is characteristic of victims in an abusive relationship that they "have nowhere to go".

It is important for progressives to begin looking for new political structures where our views are taken seriously. The political situation is too serious for progressive Democrats to sit around complaining about elected officials, and then fall in line because we have nowhere else to go. There is a large potential progressive constituency in America that Democrats cannot or will not cultivate. The New Party (known locally as Progressive Johnson County) is one option; the Eastern Iowa Labor Party Advocates is another. These are small and as of now marginal political initiatives. But activists in both groups recognize the central problem in current politics: the lack of any way for progressives to voice their political views. They are committed to finding realistic and practical ways for progressives to act politically without wasting our time or our votes. ☛

— Jeff Cox

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# How a Bill Really Becomes a Law

**F**or years, sixth-graders throughout Iowa have been taught that a bill becomes law when: "First, someone has an idea..."

After lobbying for five years, I have found that a bill becomes a law under different circumstances.

First, someone has a dumb idea.

Second, a legislator sees the opportunity for votes in that dumb idea.

Next, the legislator requests that the Iowa Legislative Service Bureau convert that dumb idea into the form of a bill. The ILSB informs the legislator that the idea may be unconstitutional. The legislator says: "That's OK. We'll fix that problem on the floor."

Once the bill is introduced on the floor of either the House of Representatives or the Iowa Senate, it is referred to the appropriate committee where a subcommittee is appointed to eventually sign a paper indicating that those legislators know how to sign their names.

A lobbyist reads the bill and comes up with a dumber idea. The lobbyist rushes to talk to a friendly legislator for the purpose of having an amendment drafted. The ILSB drafts the amendment and the friendly legislator stands up on the floor of the appropriate chamber and says that "this amendment is non-controversial." Another legislator asks how this amendment will affect his large contingent of Euvotefermee constituents in upper Lincoln County. The legislator who introduced the amendment doesn't have a clue, but he informs the inquisitive legislator that this amendment will be good for all her constituents because it will allow those Euvotefermees, and non-Euvotefermees, to come to her and have her explain its provisions,

thus giving them the opportunity to get out of the house on a cold Saturday morning.

When the bill is read for the last time and placed on its passage, bells ring, people yell, and all hell breaks loose as lawmakers come running from all directions to look up at the colorful red, white and green board to see how their party leadership voted, raising a finger or putting their thumb down to indicate that they can follow-the-leader. After the majority party gets the vote to come out in their favor, the bill moves across the rotunda where the process, beginning with subcommittee members knowing how to sign their names, starts all over again.

Once a bill has passed one chamber of the general assembly and has been read for the first time in the opposite chamber, another lobbyist notices that the bill was changed in the original chamber and contacts her favorite legislator to amend the bill with language that would alter the original intent of the bill. During debate, some lawmakers read about how great the bill is in the newspaper, a few make arrangements for lunch with altogether different lobbyists, while others talk on the phone. Without realizing it, the amendment is adopted as two or three legislators yell "aye" very loud. The bill, as amended, passes the chamber and is sent back to its chamber of origin.

The leadership in the bill's original chamber don't like what the party in the chamber across the rotunda did to the bill, so they amend the bill once again. At this point, the bill doesn't do anything it was originally designed to enact. Along party lines, the bill is passed again and sent across the rotunda. Legislators on the other side are

furious that the bill came back to them with all of their dumb ideas replaced with even dumber ideas. The leadership in this chamber persuade everyone else who is reading the paper, talking on the phone, etc., to insist that their version is the best.

The bill goes to a conference committee where five legislators from each chamber sit down to come up with a completely different idea. They shake hands, go back to their respective chambers, and tell the other 140 lawmakers who are reading the paper, talking on the phone, etc., that they have come up with a great compromise. The conference committee report is adopted after one or two legislators read it and agree that they really don't understand what it says, but that they can't see where it will cost them any votes, so it must be good. The bill, as amended, goes to the governor's office for his signature.

The governor's staff tells him that there could be a great opportunity for the press to take pictures of him signing the bill, so the governor signs the bill and life for Euvotefermees in upper Lincoln County has changed drastically, thereby giving them an idea to present to their legislator for next year's session of the Iowa General Assembly. Meanwhile, the Iowa Code Editor announces that the 1997 edition of the Iowa Code will be published in five volumes rather than the recent increase to four volumes. ☹

— Marty Ryan lives  
in Des Moines.

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# Hollywood, We Have a Problem

This year's field of Best Picture nominees had to be the worst in recent memory. *Apollo 13* is not *The Right Stuff*; *Braveheart* only seems good next to that other gory tale of men in kilts avenging their women, *Rob Roy*; *Sense and Sensibility* is of the same class but not in the same league as *Room With A View*; and *Babe*, the underdog, must have been thrown in as a bone to punning critics. To find a deserving picture, the Academy had to do what it's done only four other times in its history, include a foreign-language movie: *The Postman (Il Postino)*, an Italian movie with a British director.

What does the latest crop of Oscar contenders have to say about the state of the nation? A quick run through the major categories tells us that while the Best Picture field may be weak, the overall message is strong: Failure.

This year Hollywood honors a failed moon shot (*Apollo 13*), a failed 13th century rebellion (*Braveheart*), the failure of the state to resist the urge to kill (*Dead Man Walking*), a love not strong enough to keep "a drunk" and "a hooker" (their terms) from their dead-end destinies (*Leaving Las Vegas*), a love too late and too little to overcome family values (*Bridges of Madison County*), the failure of a time traveler to reverse the elimination of 90% of the human race (*Twelve Monkeys*), and *Nixon*.

Even the movies with traditional happy endings leave, like *Nixon*, a sour taste. The movie celebrating American ingenuity saving astronaut lives also reminds us how flawed the space program has been. Mr. Holland finally gets his opus performed, but only after he is forced into retirement by a downsizing culture that values

sports over the arts. Both the sensible and the sensuous sisters get their man in the end, but the coins tossed in the air by Colonel Brandon at the final wedding scene remind us that it's money, not love, that forges marriages and drives societies.

Hollywood's emphasis on failure is particularly appropriate in an election year, when, in a two party system, half of the country is hoping the other half fails. Jimmy Carter once paid dearly for trying to use national malaise as a political theme. Nowadays, even elected officials gloat over a government shutdown, and get away with it.

The mood of the country, and Academy voters, turns nasty at election time. Not since the year of Hannibal the Cannibal has the Academy nominated so many demented sociopaths: an over-the-top loony (Brad Pitt), a suicidal alcoholic (Nicholas Cage), a macho rapist killer (Sean Penn), a foppish rapist killer (Tim Roth), the devil incarnate (Kevin Spacey), and Nixon.

The strength of the actress categories this year revives our perennial hopes for the future of women's roles. But there is a downside. While Nicolas Cage is a heavy favorite to win for his portrayal of a self-destructive alcoholic, Jennifer Jason Leigh, who is even more powerful as a woman addicted to drugs and song in *Georgia*, didn't even get nominated. Even when portraying losers, women still have to be at least twice as good as men.

"Failure is not an option," declares the mission commander in Houston in *Apollo 13*. But the mission has already failed; survival is the issue. Many insiders are wondering if Hollywood can

survive what is happening to the industry. Hollywood is in trouble. More than 1.3 billion people went to the movies in 1995—the highest number in history. But *Apollo 13* is the only made-in-Hollywood movie in a ceremony that is supposed to celebrate Hollywood's best. One studio executive points to the "suicidal" practice of paying the stars so much that nothing is left to make the movie. In Hollywood—just like in the rest of society—all the money is going to the top.

One way to restore profitability would be for more studios to follow the *Babe* example. Since voices are cheaper than people, use pigs (*Babe* used 48), then after production you can serve them for dinner. One Hollywood honcho has suggested making more *Babes* with worldwide appeal. Even better, why not go the lifeless *Toy Story* route, the first totally computer-animated movie, and most profitable picture of the year. *Toy Story* has been called "the movie whose technology could render most Academy members obsolete."

The other way is to increase overseas sales. By the year 2000 the foreign market could account for nearly 80% of box-office revenues. And what kind of movies sell abroad? Not the gentle kind with a man on a bicycle and a metaphor as its most powerful weapon. No. Foreigners, like most Americans, prefer movies that help explain why war comes so easily to our world: the bullet-ridden kinds made by our monosyllabic, two-fisted pec-tacular restaurateurs.

They don't call it Planet Hollywood for nothing. ☹

— Jae Retz

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For more information, call Helena Worthen at 319-337-4639.

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Also coming soon: the long-awaited increase in subscription rates; desperate, groveling fundraising appeals; Prairie Dog's Summer Reading List.



## "The bosses have two parties. We need one of our own!"

If you agree, become a Labor Party Advocate. For information about the Eastern Iowa Chapter of Labor Party Advocates, call Dan Holub at 319-366-3434 or Sylvia Kelley at 319-364-8546



April 10, 1996  
Ralph Nader lecture, "The Global Economy: It's Your Business," 7:30 pm, Iowa Memorial Union, Iowa City

April 11, 1966  
Emmett Ashford became the first Black major league umpire

April 14, 1996  
"Too Many Prisons in Iowa," a forum sponsored by the Hawkeye Chapter of the Iowa Civil Liberties Union, 10:00 am, Unitarian Church, Cedar Rapids

April 14, 1986  
U.S. bombed Libya

April 25, 1996  
Michael Moore lecture, "TV Nation, Roger, & Me," 7:30 pm, Iowa Memorial Union, Iowa City

May 18, 1996  
Iowa Civil Liberties Union annual spring banquet (more info: 515-243-3576)

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*Business as Usual,  
Continued from Page 1*

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—Prairie Dog

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## THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE

Box 1945

Iowa City, IA 52244

**"Every four years,  
the choice  
between the bad  
and the worst  
gets worse."  
—Ralph Nader**

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