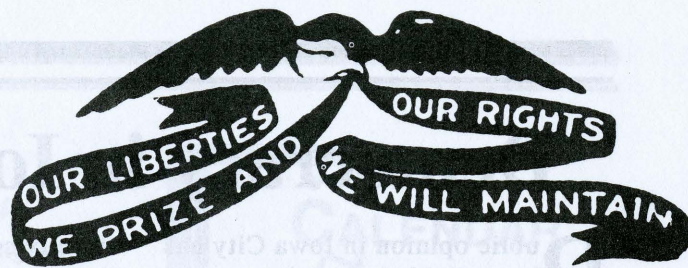


THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



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Spring 1997

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Capitol Punishment

Helped by the Des Moines Register, Republicans perpetuate the myth that electoral defeat awaits legislators foolish enough to oppose capital punishment.

The Register cites its Iowa Poll showing that 74% of Iowans said yes when asked if the death penalty should be restored for certain crimes. Republicans insist that most of the new legislators rode their support of the death penalty to victory.

Nevertheless, no Democrat who opposed the death penalty was defeated last year (just as no US congressman suffered for opposing a constitutional amendment to balance the budget).

The 74% is misleading, too. As high as that number sounds, it is 4% lower than 2 years ago, and 7% lower than 4 years ago. At this rate of erosion, we only have to wait until 2013 before a majority of Iowans oppose restoration of the death penalty.

3rd District Representative Leonard Boswell fooled Iowans who thought he was a congenial moderate.

The former candidate for lieutenant-governor was hailed for bringing balance to Bonnie Campbell's gubernatorial slate in 1994. Now, as Congress's oldest freshman, he's turning out to be a radical activist who tries to amend

the US Constitution every chance he gets.

Boswell's first major vote in Congress was in favor of the Balanced Budget amendment. His second big vote was in favor of the



Term Limits amendment. Boswell will soon have another chance to express his distrust of America's most fundamental document, when the amendment to make flag "desecration" illegal comes before the House.

Conservative PP readers who think the Constitution deserves more protection than a symbolic piece of cloth can reach Boswell at 202-225-3806.

Recently Boswell, alone among Iowa's congressmen, voted against a resolution condoning a judge's display of the 10 Commandments in an Alabama courtroom. Believers in the separation of church and state may want to thank Boswell for

finding one part of the Constitution he can live with.

Minnette Doderer and Ed Fallon were the only Iowa representatives who just said no to cuts in the inheritance tax and to a 15% across-the-board income tax cut. You can thank them at 515-281-3221.

Doderer has distinguished herself for years as a genuine Democrat with guts to spare. She's done it again in 1997, ignoring the spineless strategy of her colleagues who fear the next election more than they fear the consequences of abandoning progressive tax principles.

Doderer also deserves most of the credit for weakening parental notification requirements. She stood up to smarmy moralist Dan Bodicker (R-Tipton) and surprised everyone by managing to at least keep grandparents in the law.

Fallon looks like Doderer's heir apparent. Fellow Dems sometimes mock him for his stubbornness, his "purity," and his distaste for deal-making, but no one can accuse him of ducking and running.

Fallon hasn't flinched in the face of tax giveaways to the rich, the growth of the prison-industrial complex, gay-bashing, random searches of school lockers, and attacks on workers' rights. And he plays a pretty good accordion, too.

— *Prairie Dog*

Democracy in Iowa City

Public opinion in Iowa City has been divided over the unprovoked killing of Eric Shaw by an Iowa City police officer and, on a smaller scale, by efforts to create a union at the New Pioneer Cooperative. Both the Iowa City Police Department and the New Pioneer Cooperative are institutions subject to a considerable degree of popular democratic control. The Iowa City City Council can not actually fire the Chief of Police, but vigorous and effective public pressure forced the city council into a vote of confidence. No one has even suggested the possibility that the City Manager and Chief of Police would have defied a negative vote by the City Council. Such a course of action would have probably resulted in immediate moves to change the city charter.

In addition to practical control over the police, we also have a directly elected police authority, the Johnson County Sheriff. Such a level of democratic control is almost unheard of in other democratic countries, where police forces are normally under the control of the central government. When I lived in London in the mid 1970s, a common ultra-left wing demand was the creation of police forces accountable to elected local governments. Such a proposal was regarded as laughable. What we take for granted in Iowa City was, quite literally, unthinkable to the majority of people in Britain.

The New Pioneer Cooperative also operates under the control of its members, who elect a board that in turn selects the manager. A great deal of anger has been directed against the board of directors for their opposition to an employees union. But the angry people elected the board, and can elect a new one. On the New Pioneer board, as on

the city council, the obstacles to democratic control are not primarily structural. The problem lies in the attitudes of the people elected.

Iowa City has a weak city council/strong city manager form of government, put into place in part as a result of the efforts of the League of Women Voters. The key word in such a system is profes-

“...the corporate model will only work with an entirely apathetic population with total confidence in local elites.”

sionalism. The intention was to create a city council that would act like the board of directors of a big corporation, with the city manager as CEO. But the corporate model will only work with an entirely apathetic population with total confidence in local elites. It contradicts deeply rooted assumptions about the ability of people to control their own government, as well as the political reality of a directly elected city council.

From the very first, city staff and the conservative city council majority have seen mobilized public opinion as a threat to their assumptions about how government should operate. City Manager Steve Atkins' first advice to the City Council was “keep quiet and let me handle this.” County prosecutor Pat White (also directly elected!) followed his ruling that the police officer in question had committed no criminal act with a statement

saying he hoped his decision would bring “closure” in this case. City Manager Atkins responded by saying that he would never question the judgment of someone that he respects as much as Pat White.

But of course White's ruling has not brought closure, in part because he is (as he often reminds us) accountable to the voters. The important point is the rush by political officials to shut down public debate, for fear that it would discredit them and the way they govern. Their statements are comparable to those of the President of the New Pioneer board, Rick Stewart, who argued that New Pioneer members have no say in matters of unionization. It is an internal matter, to be handled by professionals rather than uninformed and angry “members.” Much of the anger with the New Pioneer Board is not a result merely of their lack of recognition that unions are good for the community. It has been caused by the secretive assertion that members should stay out of this, and the whining of management that any support for a union represents some kind of personal affront to them as individuals, and a sophisticated, expensive corporate-style union busting campaign paid for by co-op members.

These are only two examples of the array of democratic institutions that we have in the United States, an inheritance of a past where Americans had more faith in democracy. Politics in a democracy is 95% education, especially on issues like police accountability and the obligation of all good citizens to support labor unions. It sounds like a pious cliché, but citizens actually can make a difference in the long run if they join together in organizations like Citizens for Justice and Accountability in the Death of Eric Shaw, or the Members for an Accountable Coop.

— Jeff Cox

Calculated Risks: Showtime in Johnson County

The Johnson County Democrats held their off-year caucus March 31, but it's never an off-year here. Seventy-five activists gathered in a church basement to hold auditions for Senator, Congressman, and Governor, and to hear heartfelt explanations from their wayward legislators.

Opening act Dave Nagle warmed up the crowd by announcing that he was "angry" at his party for losing its way on the issue of progressive taxes. Asked about federal welfare reform, the former congressman said without hesitation, "I would have voted against it."

Bob Rush built on Nagle's theme by railing against "me too" Dems, in Des Moines as well as Washington, who seek re-election by echoing Republicans. Rush may have already lost the next election the moment Jim Leach withheld support for Newt Gingrich as Speaker of the House, but he's game for another try.

Next up was Des Moines lawyer Mark McCormick. Catching on quickly, he decried the legislature for inadequately examining tax fairness and for cutting taxes before setting a budget. He demanded more prevention and less detention for juvenile crime, contrasted the cost of college to the cost of jail, and called for more programs on the front end, not the back end.

Encouraged by the audience's appreciative nods at the Jesse Jackson riff, McCormick stated that the only difference between a beer after work and a joint after work is that one is illegal. But he began to lose his rhythm when asked about his role as attorney for Iowa Beef Processors. The best he could manage was a promise to separate

himself from his law firm as a gubernatorial candidate.

McCormick finished by boasting that he had chaired a task force on the state's institutions for people with disabilities, but couldn't say what the task force recommended, except that not all of "these people" need expensive services.

State Senator Tom Vilsack stepped to the mike. No one in Iowa politics makes a more decent, solid, sensible first impression than

"there were many
baffled looks in
the old Unitarian
church..."

the former mayor of Mt. Pleasant. He scored with the crowd by denouncing current learnfare legislation as a pseudo-truancy program that, no matter how it's papered over, discriminates against people on welfare and could penalize an entire family for the actions of one member. *Editor's note: The only votes against learnfare in the Iowa House were Bernau, Brand, Fallon, Foege, Ford, and Shultz.*

Vilsack was the only speaker who didn't bring up taxes, nor was he asked. Maybe he was more intent on telling his personal story of being adopted by parents who battled substance abuse. Maybe the crowd was busy mulling his strange comparison of Terry Branstad to Fidel Castro. Certainly there were many baffled looks in the old Unitarian church when he described current societal tensions as a conflict between the Old and New Testaments, explaining that one

was paternalistic and one emphasized community.

The crowd thinned out after a much-needed break, but many stayed to hear House members Dick Myers and Mary Mascher defend their recent votes to cut income taxes across the board. They tried to articulate the strategy that resulted in only six Democratic "no" votes in both houses (Hammond, Neuhauser, & Szymoniak in the Senate; Doderer, Fallon, & Dotzler in the House).

The strategy goes like this: income tax cuts are popular, so Dems must "inoculate" themselves against Republican attacks if they are to regain control of the legislature in 1998. The Dems took "a calculated risk" based on their desire "to protect" other Dems in vulnerable seats. They decided to stick together as a team, and the team decided to vote for regressive tax cuts that they themselves would never initiate.

Some Johnson County activists accepted this strategy, but a few questions went unanswered. Why do many Dems stand on principle against a popular death penalty, and speak out against a popular ban on same-sex marriage, but acquiesce to the immoral transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich? How will the state pay for services and infrastructure when federal money shrinks and tax revenue sinks? Who are legislators' constituents—their fellow legislators, or the people who elect them? What if the strategy backfires, as it did last year at the national level when the welfare-reforming Democrats failed to win back the House or Senate?

Good questions to ask in an off-year.

—Dave Leshitz

Hollywood Heal Thyself

This time around, Oscar was no more Hollywood than the English patient was English. Out of 163 major studio releases, only *Jerry Maguire* made it into the Best Picture category. How fitting that the year's big studio blockbuster served only as a clichéd pun for the headline story of this year's Academy Awards: "Independents' Day."

Still, it was *The English Patient*, the contender closest to the grand Hollywood production preferred by the Academy, that won 9 awards, while the least "Hollywood" entry, *Secrets & Lies* (my favorite), was totally shut out. And thanks to the independents, this was top to bottom as good a Best Picture offering since the dominance of technicolor. Even *Jerry Maguire* is the kind of Hollywood picture Hollywood can't seem to make anymore.

It's time for the perennial Oscar question: What real life issues dominated the reel world of this year's batch of films and performances in the major categories? The burning Washington issue, a balanced budget, obviously wasn't Oscar material. Family values were big, though, most notably in *Secrets & Lies*, *Jerry Maguire* and *Marvin's Room*. Even *The People vs. Larry Flynt* played on the family theme (leading viewers to believe that Courtney Love was playing Flynt's one and only wife, not his fifth). *Shine* showed the negative side of family values in a father so determined to keep his family together that he won't let his son leave to fulfill his talent.

Race and class got little play from this year's nominees, but gender was still a major theme (only *Secrets & Lies* gave all three their due), with lots of single mothers, and the women coming off

a lot better than the men. In an ironic twist on the proverbial battle of the sexes, *Fargo*'s good cop Frances McDormand triumphs easily (and pregnantly) over a really stupid pack of villains.

You know it was a good year for women when Meryl Streep isn't needed to fill the Best Actress category. Overall, the women truly outshone the men. The winner, McDormand, gave credit to the freedom of independent filmmakers to cast women "according to qualifications and not market value."

As for the men, host Billy Crystal pointed out that the Best Actor characters were "damaged" in one way or another: the English patient burned beyond recognition, Flynt crippled by a bullet, Helfgott emotionally crippled by his father, and the protagonist of *Sling Blade*, born mentally retarded.

It doesn't get any better with the Supporting men. William H. Macy's car dealer hires criminals to kidnap his wife in *Fargo*, Armin Mueller-Stahl plays a sadistic father in *Shine*, Edward Norton's pathological Aaron savagely murders an archbishop in *Primal Fear*, and James Woods as Byron De La Beckwith assassinates civil rights leader Medgar Evers in *Ghosts of Mississippi*.

Leading the body count is the "lovable slasher" played by Billy Bob Thornton, who has his own particular solution for domestic discord.

With the men so sick, it's naturally the women who step in as healers. The faux English patient was just one of several men needing the nurturing hand of a woman. Juliette Binoche won an Oscar for her supportive nurse, reading to the so-called Englishman and injecting his pain killing medicine, even the

overdose when he asks for it. No such luck with Flynt. (Hey, it's my First Amendment right to say that.) It's Courtney Love, not licensed like Binoche, who overdoses on her sick husband's drugs.

Marvin's Room is named after the bedroom where Diane Keaton has selflessly cared for her dying father for 20 years: "He's doing it real slow so I don't miss a thing." She develops leukemia, meaning that her sister (Streep) will assume the duties of caring for both her and their father. David Helfgott is today still under the care of his wife Gillian. (Byron De La Beckwith was eventually taken care of by the criminal justice system of the state of Mississippi.)

One movie, *Breaking the Waves*, tries to make a religion out of women nursing men. Emily Watson plays a feeble minded young wife who agrees to take up lovers to feed the drugged erotic fantasies of her paralyzed husband, believing she can heal him that way. When she dies at the hand of sadists, he miraculously recovers. A Passion Play direct from the loins of director Lars von Trier, this demented tale of the ultimate sacrifice through total degradation would be a waste of a great face, if not for Watson's revenge in the form of an Oscar nomination.

Those claiming that *Shine* has been tarnished by the exploitative post-movie concert tour of David Helfgott are forgetting Hitchcock's line that movies are life with the dull parts cut out. That's why we expect to be paid for leaving the house 5 days a week, but will pay \$5 to enter a movie theater.

And a record number did this year, pushing the box office take to \$5.5 billion. With numbers like

Continued on Page 5

Today, in the face of downsizing, plant closures, and world-wide health disparity, policy-makers and citizens alike are responding not with calls for corporate responsibility, or with the biblical mandate to "welcome the stranger," but with calls for raiding immigrant worker communities, militarizing our borders, denying benefits even to legal immigrants, and "English Only" legislation. English as the official or "common" language attempts to fix a non-existent problem and in its wake, nurtures a climate of divisiveness, superiority, and hostility.

—American Friends
Service Committee,
Iowa Program
February 24, 1997

Hollywood, Continued from Page 4

that, and re-releases proving more profitable than sequels, Hollywood will settle for winning only the hi-tech "glitz" categories of sound and visual effects, and will do nothing about the diminishing human or aesthetic quality of its product. Which means we may never see the day when the studios greet a new movie project with Billy Bob's affirming "mm-hmm" instead of their standard Cuba Gooding Jr. reply: "Show me the moneeeey!!!"?

— Jae Retz

Thanks...

to PP readers who have contributed a total of \$710 since the last fundraising letter. We hope to hear from the rest of you soon!

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April 15, 1947

Jackie Robinson became major league baseball's first Black player

May 1, 1886

US workers went on strike for an 8-hour day

May 1, 1997

International Workers' Day Celebration

Noon, pedestrian mall by the fountain, Iowa City

Songs and speakers' corner sponsored by AFT 716

More info: 319-338-3446

May 1, 1997

Taking the Human Rights

Temperature of Iowa City

7-9 P.M., Old Brick, Iowa City

Community Forum sponsored

by Human Rights Iowa City

More info: 319-337-7290

May 3, 1997

Iowa Civil Liberties Union

Annual Dinner

7:30 pm, Iowa Memorial Union

Keynote: Frank Askin, general

counsel, ACLU, author of

Defending Rights: Life in Law and Politics

More info & dinner

reservations: 515-243-3988 or

319-351-2973

May 5, 1996

FBI reported a drop in serious crimes for 4th straight year

May 9, 1997

Mothers in Prison Campaign

4:30 pm, west side of Polk

County Courthouse,

Des Moines

More info: 515-262-2024

May 28, 1967

Muhammed Ali refused to be drafted

June 6, 1995

South Africa banned capitol punishment