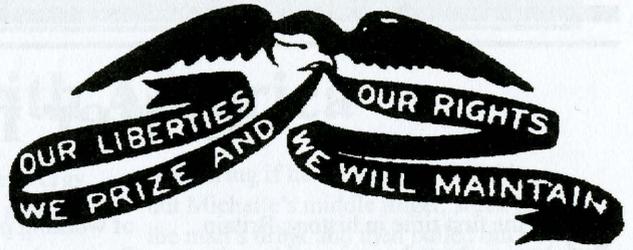


THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



May 2010

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Goofy Bills

During every Iowa legislative session at least one goofy bill shows up. This year, the quota of one bill per year was reached early and often. There were even goofy amendments.

Attempts to amend the Iowa Constitution by some fringe groups are sources for some of the goofiest ideas (remember the Stanley Amendment?). This year, House Joint Resolution 2016 would have Iowa become one of those states whose ballot consists of page after page of "referendums." Do not confuse this with "initiatives." An initiative is an effort by the citizens of a state to place something on the ballot that the general assembly wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole, mostly because it's a ridiculous idea. A referendum is a measure in which legislators move a piece of legislation to the ballot so that voters may approve it or reject it. In short, it takes the pressure off legislators. This is called a "voluntary referendum." I think it comes from the Latin phrase "refer en to dumb." It's bad enough we let legislators vote on complicated issues that most of them don't understand. Having an uninformed populace vote on sound bites is a terrible way to rule.

HJR 2002 would have made it a constitutional violation to deprive anyone a job because of their membership in a union, or, more importantly, because the person refuses to join a labor union or pay union dues. The proposal was introduced by all 44 Republicans, and unbelievably, no Democrats.

You have to wonder if the sponsors of HJR 2003 knew what they were proposing when they wanted to add that the "right to life is the paramount and

most fundamental right of every person." Michigan is the only state in the Union in which a state constitution outlaws the death penalty. Even a bad judge would have to agree that if this proposal was adopted Iowa would be right up there with Michigan. The lead sponsor of this potential constitutional change voted in favor of the death penalty in 1995.

Contradiction is a natural accomplice of goofy bills. Some of the same people sponsoring the previous constitutional amendment sponsored HJR 2007, a constitutional amendment "preserving the freedom of Iowans to provide for their own health care." Let's see, life is paramount, but once you're born you're on your own to figure out how to maintain that life.

Several amendments to the bill banning the behavior of texting while driving began with the subtitle of "common sense required." The concept and language was simple. "A person shall use common sense at all times when the person is operating a motor vehicle." I can't understand why common sense should be limited to driving. Can you imagine the entire Iowa Code replaced by a simple phrase? "Common sense is the law of Iowa." There, that was easy.

The goofiest bill of 2010, and of the decade (perhaps the century), was a bill that would prohibit a judge from using judicial precedent or case law, a staple of the federal and state court systems since the beginning of our nation and state. The bill further restricts judicial findings to "material" found only in "the Constitution of the United States" and "the Federalist Papers and other writings of the Founding Fathers to describe the in-

tent of the Founding Fathers." I suppose love letters from George to Martha would fall into this category if George wrote about crossing the Potomac.

Section 2 of the bill prohibits the courts from reviewing the bill for constitutional flaws. The third operation of the bill makes it a violation of the act if a judicial officer attempts to interpret the act. That act of judicial activism will be "malfeasance in office and subjects the [judge or justice] to impeachment." This way, the Legislature gets to be more equal than the other branches of government.

Lobbyists were the target of a few silly bills this year. HF 2019 would have required all lobbyists to wear "in a clearly visible manner, a tag or badge bearing the lobbyist's name." Laws have a way of expanding year to year. Today, a little blue-bordered sticker saying "Hello, my name is . . ." Tomorrow, a sandwich board.

Another attempt to control lobbyists was HF 2010. This bill would have prohibited a state agency from hiring a person whose only job was to lobby the Legislature. Actually, this is a good bill. Department liaisons, as they insist upon being called, are some of the most powerful lobbyists under the golden dome. In 2010, there were 196 bills out of 923 introduced that made it to the governor's office. Fifty-eight of those bills, or 30%, were bills introduced by various departments and agencies, not counting governmental associations.

Goofy is in the eye of the beholder. I went through a lot of eye drops this past session. ✂

— Marty Ryan made sausage for 8 years in Denison, IA.

Letter from London

For the first time in history, Britain has conducted a series of American-style televised debates as part of its general election campaign. There is a certain air of unreality for an American watching these debates in Britain. Although in terms of style the debates follow the familiar American format, surface similarities disguise the fact that they are fundamentally different. British voters are being asked to listen to the leaders of the three major political parties--Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat--as if they could then go out and vote for one of them. British voters, though, do not vote for a Prime Minister, only for their local member of parliament. Once elected, the members of parliament will choose a prime minister.

The polls show the electorate split roughly equally, with 30% for each of three major parties, and 10% for one of the minor parties including the neo-fascist British National Party. Because of the way Britain's electoral system works, the outcome is highly unpredictable, and could depend on last-minute decisions by a few thousand voters in a handful of districts.

As you read this article you may know the name of the new Prime Minister, but as of a few days before the election, even the most egotistical of Britain's notoriously self-important political columnists and television commentators are unwilling to hazard a firm prediction. After the election, they will no doubt claim that they saw it all coming. For what it's worth, Britain's thriving and legal bookmaking industry, which will accept a bet on anything, is giving an edge to the Conservative leader David Cameron.

Especially among young working class voters, the number of people who do not vote at all is growing. Others are turning to the small but growing racist or nationalist parties. There are a number of reasons for this, including hopelessness in the face of the global capitalist slump, but one of the reasons is the abandonment

of working people by the "New Labour" Party under the leadership of Tony Blair and the current Prime Minister, Gordon Brown.

Like the New Democratic Party of Clinton and Obama, the New Labour Party no longer regards itself as the party of the unions, which founded the Labour Party to represent working people. Embattled union activists now find themselves in an abusive relationship with a party leadership that ignores them, and never lifts a finger to pass legislation that would strengthen union organizing. New Labour regards them as a lobby that can be pacified with behind-the-scenes political patronage in return for large campaign donations.

Just as they shun the unions, New Labour shuns government entitlements. They are unwilling to respond to the depression with popular new universal entitlement programs that benefit working people, like Medicare in America or the National Health Service in Britain. These programs work because they benefit all working people, not just those in unions or those who qualify for means-tested "welfare." Instead Labour leaders speak the "we know best" language of technocratic elitism so familiar to us from the Obama administration. Their social welfare proposals are too complicated for anyone to understand, mimic the free market instead of replacing it, have a large income-related welfare component, and are widely unpopular even when they do some good.

Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown becomes visibly frustrated and even angry when he confronts traditional Labour voters who are not grateful for the many wonderful things he has done for them. As he reels off a mind-numbing list of tax credits for the poor and economic development schemes run by highly-paid technocrats, the voters' minds go numb. In most polls, the governing Labour party comes in third in the popular vote.

Gordon Brown is unpopular for an-

other reason: his strong commitment to Obama's escalating war in Afghanistan. A person watching the debates would conclude that the British electorate has forgotten about this war, which only appears in the papers when another British soldier is blown up, or when the press stumbles upon another set of innocent Afghan civilians who meet gruesome deaths at the hands of NATO soldiers.

The war, though, is widely unpopular, and is only absent from the campaign because the three major parties all support it, and know it is unpopular. No one defends it in the way that Obama tried to justify it in his Nobel Peace Prize oration, which sounds increasingly out of touch with reality. Britain's politicians know that the war is indefensible: unwinnable, disproportionate, and careless of the lives of innocent children.

The timing is unfortunate for Brown. Despite all-party support for the war, he is the one responsible for conducting it. He gets the blame from those people who do care about war: pro-Labour activists who are quietly casting anti-war protest votes for the Liberal Democrats or Greens, and working class voters who believe that Brown sends British soldiers to die for nothing.

Earlier this year the Dutch government fell apart over dissatisfaction with having to deploy troops in Obama's war. Whether a new British government—either Conservative or some kind of coalition—will continue to shoulder that burden of unpopularity remains to be seen. ✕

— Jeff Cox

Harry loses touch with America

After 9/11, Harry kept talking. He came to the studio five nights a week with a stack of articles he had printed out, a list of topics he wanted to cover, with specific quotes circled in red. He was trying to be rational, but he lived in St Johns County, Florida, where Republicans outnumbered Democrats three to one. But even the Democrats were not much better, in St Augustine or in the rest of the country.

The crossroads came in early 2003, as Harry realized that the America he thought he knew...that country had disappeared. It went crazy, or it was kidnapped by aliens. Something beyond his comprehension, but it was still gone. Sitting in The Tavern among friends, he watched television as Baghdad was being shocked and awed. Everyone else seemed to be cheering, but all Harry could think about was the final scene of *Apocalypse Now*, the air-strike called in, the jungle turned into a fireball. But nobody in The Tavern was in the mood for Vietnam analogies. "Take that, pudsucker!" yelled a young man in his National Guard uniform, itself a violation of some military dress code, but he never paid for a drink again that night. The chorus began. "Stone age for you Arabs! Your ass is next, Osama! Red, white, and blow you away!"

Michelle was working the bar and she was kept hustling all night, but she made a point to keep Harry re-filled without him asking. She was also in charge of the jukebox volume, and as much as she tried to keep the music going the crowd kept yelling for her to turn it down so they could hear the television. So, she pumped up the volume on the three televisions, and the concussive thump of every cruise missile hitting Baghdad was like thunder in the Tavern. Harry was no exception to the feeling, the sensual vibrations of reverberating explosions. From a distance, it was a pleasure. Too many books, he told himself, too many movies, something I read a long time ago, Tim O'Brien? Something about combat, if you could remove the danger, then

combat was beautiful? An aesthetic orgy of color and sound, but O'Brien probably said it better.

That was the night it finally changed for Harry. He stopped talking about the facts of the war, the right and wrongs of politicians and generals, the courage of war opponents and the duplicity of its supporters. He remembered how he felt within a few weeks of 9/11, as his grief for his own son was more and more internalized as his guilt surfaced. He and Jack and a lot more people around him all seemed to feel like they were part of something bigger than their prior petty disagreements, that the country he loved

"Harry was no exception to the feeling, the sensual vibrations of reverberating explosions. From a distance, it was a pleasure."

was going to change for the better. Evil would be punished. The issues were clear.

A single line from Michelle nudged him closer to his break, a line she shouted at the television as another building collapsed in Baghdad, "That'll teach you to try and kill George's daddy." Harry recognized the attempt at humor, and appreciated that Michelle seemed to know a little more background about the war than he would have guessed she knew. But the crowd was not amused. The paunchy man sitting next to Harry growled, "Michelle, you better watch what you say. This is serious shit."

Harry had glanced over at the man, and then back to look at Michelle,

wondering if he should say something, but Michelle's middle finger, stuck in the man's drink and then pulled out and flicked at him, ended the conversation. The man eased himself off the stool and humped away as Michelle said to Harry, "He and me got history together. He knows I won't take his shit." Harry tipped his glass at her, his eyes still enthralled by her chest, "Michelle, will you marry me?"

She rolled her eyes and took his glass away. "Go home, Harry. I'll call you a cab."

"You didn't answer my question," he slurred, but resigning himself to the usual rejection.

"Harry, go sleep it off. You're too old for me, as much as I like you grey panther types." She grinned, wiping the counter as she lifted his half-full glass. In the background, somebody was shouting something about real men wanting to go to Tehran instead of Baghdad.

"Your loss," he said as he stood and handed her a fifty, motioning for her to keep the change.

"I'll take my chances," she said, stuffing the bill in her exposed bra. "Now, go home and go to sleep. I'll see you soon."

Harry nodded, stood up, and looked around the crowded bar. Except for Michelle, he was alone. ✕

—Excerpt from *A Good Man*, a new novel by Larry Baker of Iowa City

Iowa's Hidden Latino History

Census projections for Iowa's Latino population in 2010 stand around 128,000—an increase of nearly 60 percent in the past ten years. This growing population affects Iowa communities and now, in an election year, its state politics, as Arizona's anti-immigrant bandwagon has Iowa's GOP gubernatorial candidates climbing on board.

Iowa has a long and richly complicated Latino history, reaching back over a hundred years. A pivotal period in this history occurred between 1967 and 1970, when a core group of Iowa Latinos and Latinas stood in solidarity with grape pickers in California and migrant workers employed in Iowa agribusiness. Born and raised in Iowa in the 1920s and 1930s, these Iowa activists were the children of Mexican immigrants who came to the upper Midwest to work.

By 1969, this core group of second-generation Mexican Americans was leading a coalition of community activists to support the rights of grape pickers in California to organize a union of their choosing and bargain collectively. Members of the Davenport council of the League of United Latin American Citizens, LULAC Council 10, formed the Quad City Grape Boycott Committee. Together with representatives from unions, church groups and civil rights organizations, they handed out leaflets, picketed supermarkets, organized rallies, and persuaded supermarkets, including A&P, to stop carrying California table grapes.

Rita Vargas, the then 10-year-old daughter of the head of the “huelga” committee, recalled that standing picket duty with her father in Davenport was controversial and at times frightening. People would yell at them, swear at them and spit at them. Within a twelve-month period, United Farm Workers leaders Cesar Chavez, Antonio Orendain, Dolores Huerta, and Eliseo Medina had all visited Davenport.

Emerging with support for the grape boycott was a struggle for the

rights of seasonal migrant workers employed in Iowa agribusiness. Each year over 1,000 Mexican American field workers travelled from Texas to work in the tomato fields around Muscatine where the H.J Heinz Company operated a large cannery. In 1967, Iowa Mexican Americans and their allies supported a migrant child labor bill to establish a minimum age for the employment of migrant children on Iowa farms. As in other parts of the country, Iowa migrant workers were excluded from the pro-labor provisions of federal legislation implemented by Congress during the New Deal era to protect workers in other industries. Agricultural laborers were not covered by the collective bargaining provisions of the Wagner Act or by the minimum wage, overtime, and child labor provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act.

The migrant child labor bill before the Iowa General Assembly in 1967 seemed likely to fail. In a Republican-dominated legislature allied with the Farm Bureau and corporate agriculture, it would need strong bipartisan support even to make it out of committee. The bill faced opposition from the H. J. Heinz Company and from tomato growers around Muscatine, who feared it would put them at an unfair disadvantage with neighboring Illinois. Support for the bill came from church groups, unions, LULAC and migrant agencies.

After months of heated debate, the bill was signed into law. The law prohibited farmers from *knowingly* employing migrant children under ten at any time and from *knowingly* employing children under fourteen before and during school hours. The use of the word *knowingly* made the law unenforceable as farmers could always plead ignorance of the age of any child they employed, thus placing the burden of responsibility with the parents.

Iowa Mexican Americans stepped forward again in 1969 to support efforts to strengthen Iowa's migrant child labor law and to regulate housing standards in Iowa migrant camps. Legislators heard

testimonies of Latino activists describing the deplorable conditions at migrant camps around Muscatine and Mason City. On March 19, 1969, 1,500 demonstrators gathered in Des Moines to show the strength of support for migrant workers legislation in Iowa. At the rally, the bill's sponsor, House Representative John Tapscott from Des Moines, called for a boycott of Heinz Company products while the director of UAW Region 4 called for a union organizing drive of migrant workers in Iowa.

Iowa legislators responded to pressure from Mexican American activists and their allies. In May 1969, the Iowa House approved the migrant camp bill, effective immediately. And forty years ago, a few months after Governor Ray signed a new 1970 Iowa child labor law that strengthened protections for migrant children on Iowa farms, California growers signed contracts with Cesar Chavez, recognizing the United Farm Workers, AFL-CIO, as the sole bargaining agent for grape pickers in Delano California.

Two years ago, the nation turned its attention to the immigration raid at the AgriProcessors plant in Postville, Iowa. On May 12, 2008, Immigration and Customs Enforcement Officials carried out the biggest immigration raid (at that time) in U. S. history, storming the packinghouse and arresting nearly 400 undocumented workers. Standing at the entrance to St. Bridget's Catholic Church, where many Latinos later took sanctuary, Sister Mary McCauley stated: “This is a call for justice. This is a call to be faithful to our American and religious values . . . This is a call to stand in solidarity with our Hispanic brothers and sisters.”

This wasn't the first call for solidarity between Latino and Anglo allies in Iowa, nor is it likely to be the last. What we know from history is that Iowa Latinos and Latinas are likely to be at the front of the coming civil rights struggle. ✕

—Janet Weaver lives in Iowa City



May 3, 2005

First democratically elected Iraqi government sworn in

May 4, 1970

Four student protestors at Kent State killed by National Guard

May 14, 1970

Two students at Jackson State killed by police

May 15, 1970

Millions of US students boycotted classes to protest Vietnam War

May 19, 1925

Malcolm X born

June 19, 1865

News of emancipation finally reached slaves in Texas

July 1, 1970

Abortion legalized in New York

July 13, 1990

Dow Jones hit 3000

McSchool
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strengths of each. Our parents, public, administrators and legislators are right to expect results the same way shareholders for McDonalds expect profits. Inflexible menu items and proscribed practices are often the results of such expectations, as said items and methods have been very profitable for those whose focus is the bottom line alone.

Other states abandoned their search for artists long ago. With the constant advance of strictly scientific approaches, Iowa's getting there. Sometimes a kid is going to need some ketchup on their fish, or a preparation method not spelled out in the HR training manual. Iowa needs practitioners of the science in our kitchens who have not abandoned their artistic flair. We need to be a little bit

July 26, 1990

Americans with Disabilities Act signed into law

August 2, 1990

Kuwait invaded by Iraq

August 6, 1860

Jane Addams born

McDonald's, and a great deal more diner in our school environments.

Iowa teachers can accept—to a degree—the franchising of our classrooms, and the increasing homogenization of what we're allowed to do within them. We can trust that what appears on the menus we're given is research-based best practice. Those in power—parents, administrators, and legislators—in turn need to understand the type of business they're dictating with endless mandates. The mandates may be market-tested to please the public, but are too inflexible to respond artfully to our students. New needs will always arise in the classroom, needs that demand the mind of an artist and the drive of an inventor. I worry that what we're attracting to education with new teachers is too much efficient burger-flipper and not enough intrepid chef.

Iowa should never return to the diner approach alone and ignore what we know to be best practice, even if those folksier schools felt so much better. But we shouldn't throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Our franchises need room to breathe so we're not left staring numbly at our customers and apologizing to them that what they need is not on the menu.

After all, who are we to say that sauerkraut doesn't belong in an omelet?

— *Jacob Cummer is an Iowa City elementary teacher and author of the children's novel Catching Crazy.*

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“Politics is not an expression of your personal purity.”

— *Tony Kushner*

McSchools

As an Iowa teacher, I get asked often about the state of education. My thoughts swirl cyclonic when I hear it, and providing answers in the pat manner people want proves difficult. But there is one idea I consistently circle. In short, we're becoming McDonald's.

The schools of my youth were mom 'n pop joints, built by and for the community of stakeholders they most immediately served. They had a bottom-up feel to them, an elasticity that felt organic instead of imposed. Did they fail? Sure. Like the locally owned diner where I still breakfast during weekend visits to my hometown, there were often a few wayward onion bits hiding in pancake bites, so to speak.

And, also like my diner, these schools were a bit limited with the resources they could provide, handcuffed to a degree by their insistence on the go-it-alone philosophy, the same philosophy that made them unique in the first place.

I once overheard someone ask a server in my diner for a list of gluten-free items. I remember seeing in the server the same look teachers used to give to the suggestion of "the autism spectrum." Brain and dietary research alike have come a long way indeed.

An unwelcome jolt of savory with my sweet is not all I get from my diner, though. There are also otherworldly concoctions that warm the belly and soul in ways a value meal never could. My diner serves up the fruits of the mad scientists in the kitchen, among them a cinnamon roll of such gargantuan size and decadence that one can't possibly have a bad day after enjoying one. That diner also hosts chili-eating contests and other signatures of the community you just can't get at the bevy of chain restaurants in the area.

And while McDonald's may not practice such gastronomic alchemy in their kitchens, they do provide consis-

tency. The menu items are market-tested and research-proven to please. You can hanker for a double cheeseburger all day and know your craving will be realized in exactly the way you expected. It is designed to be impervious to human error with its prepackaged ingredients and proscribed preparation methods.

In its predictability it consistently meets with projections, but it never wows. In squelching the individuality of the preparer it precludes any hope of novelty. This attracts the cook who brings no new ideas to the craft because new ideas are not welcome. Try asking your fast food server for a different preparation of your sandwich sometime.

I was asked once as a young teacher whether I thought teaching was an art or a science. The question still leaps at me from time to time. I usually settle on thinking it's both, and should employ the

McSchool
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THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE

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"God mend thine every flaw."

— Katharine Lee Bates, *America the Beautiful*