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# THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE

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*a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left*

*February 2024*

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## A factory of injustice

Iowa is in trouble. The current legislative session has become a factory of injustice for an aggressive and self-righteous majority. Iowa's LGBTQ community, specifically transgender and non-binary Iowans, are the favored targets of the moment for a raft of harebrained new laws.

Good news: A bill that would have removed gender identity from Iowa's civil rights law failed to advance out of committee. But there is little room for relief in the state right now as our governor propels her juggernaut of far-right legislation along.

Bad news: The day after the bill on Iowa civil rights law sputtered, a new bill emerged. It would force any department at the state or local level that issues identifying documents (driver's licenses and birth certificates are specified) to add a field for gender at birth, and a field to denote gender reassignment. This designation would appear on the birth certificate and the driver's license or non-drive state-issued ID.

Details appear in a new section of Code, *4.1A Statutory Construction—Sex and Related Terms*. Here, the verbal and legal contortions necessary to initiate this outlandish invasion of privacy are outlined. Their scope, and the cavalier way in which they are declared law, would overwhelm the imagination of Orwell.

A female, you will be glad to know, is defined therein as “a person whose biological reproductive system is designed to produce ova.” A male, happily, is “a person whose biological reproductive system is designed to fertilize the ova of a female.” We can all find a million problems with this. What about biological reproductive systems that are not formed for this intent, in which some genetic error or omission prevents the reproductive mission from being achieved? Before they even attempt to consider such questions, they move on to a couple of seismic public service announcements.

*e. The term “equal” does not mean “same” or “identical.”*

*f. Separate accommodations are not inherently unequal.*

You know you are in trouble when your state's book-banning political party chooses to become lexicographers. But there's more! I give you:

*g. A person born with a medically verifiable diagnosis of disorder or difference of sex development shall be provided the legal protections and accommodations afforded under the federal Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and applicable state law.*

So they've crafted a blunt instrument of a law to single out trans Iowans by forcibly identifying them, and then defining them as *disabled* under the ADA. Eligible for all applicable protections and accommodations, of course.

Iowa's governor, and her legislative majority, is generating a maelstrom of ill-intentioned law and trying to push it along. They would imperil citizens' privacy and safety by forcing trans Iowans to present driver's licenses and birth certificates that show them to be trans. After creating a heretofore unknown level of hate and hysteria against trans persons, they would now force them to be branded on official documents for all to see and for anyone to harass, threaten, or worse.

The pressing question for Iowans who rise to object is: How best do we do so? By what means can we most effectively make our voices heard and gather reasonable Iowans into our ranks to oppose this vile incursion of government into our lives?

It is no small question. It will define our activities in politics and the pursuit of justice this year and likely for years to come. The debate has already begun in some counties. The very night the bill had

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# By the dawn's early light

The Iowa Legislature is often a source of frustration and agony for many who follow the process, and particularly for those involved in the process. But it can also be a source of great entertainment as long as you don't take things too seriously.

For instance, a bill that addresses persons selected by the general assembly to represent Iowa at the "convention called by the United States Congress to propose amendments to the United States Constitution" in accordance with Article V, has begun to move in the House Committee on State Government. Last year, the bill was moved out of committee but failed to be debated on the floor of the House. What is strange about this bill is that one of the lobbyists is Rick Santorum. Yes! That Rick Santorum, representing the Convention of States Action, has declared in support of the bill. On the other end of the lobbying spectrum, declared against passage of the bill, is the Iowa Minutemen Civil Defense Corp, in addition to the Iowa Chapter of the Sierra Club. Strange bedfellows, indeed.

The so-called purpose of the Article V convention is to take power away from the federal government and give more control to the states and local government. Speaking of local control, this general assembly has been pretty consistent in its efforts to squash local control. Amendments to Iowa's Constitution, Amendment Twenty-Five (municipal home rule adopted in the 1960s) and Amendment Thirty-Seven (county home rule adopted in the late 1970s) have been ignored in several bills, one of which is a bill to reinstate the death penalty.

Supposedly, assuming that county attorneys in Iowa's largest counties are affiliated with the Democratic Party, Senate Study Bill 3085, a bill reestablishing the death penalty in

Iowa, provides that "when in the attorney general's judgment, the interest of the state requires the attorney general to intervene on behalf of the county attorney," the attorney general will prosecute the case. There is no mention in the bill that the attorney general, or even the state, will assume the costs of the prosecution. The expense will remain the responsibility of the county. The hypocrisy in this Legislature is immense.

The Iowa and US  
Constitutions get in  
the way of the Ten  
Commandments.

Upon having several laws questioned as to their constitutionality, some legislators have filed amicus curiae (friend of the court) briefs in certain lawsuits to defend their legislation actions, or reactions. There is a system of checks and balances involved in our three separate and distinct divisions of government, but the judicial branch is considered the little sister who needs guidance in the eyes of legislators "who make the law." There is a study bill that would require a plaintiff to provide "notice to the general assembly in actions regarding the constitutionality of a statute."

You can understand why the general assembly wants to be aware of lawsuits challenging the constitutionality of laws made by the lawmakers. The Iowa and U.S. Constitutions get in the way of the Ten Commandments. A bill that would require public school students to sing at least one verse of the National Anthem every day, study

the anthem, and the history of it, had a discussion by a subcommittee. It may not see the light of day, or if you prefer, the dawn's early light, but it doesn't apply to private school students. They have the First Commandment.

And now that your attention is tuned in to religion, a subcommittee meeting was held on the definition of "woman." Although the chairperson of the meeting was mum on the purpose for this necessary description in Iowa law ("Woman" means an adult female human), a woman at the meeting said that "God has made the definition of a woman clear through both special relations, scripture, and general revelation creation." Amber Williams, an Iowa resident said "He made her, then made him. Male and female, he created them." Obviously, Ms. Williams has not consulted the biblical Book of Genesis where God made man first and called him Adam, and then made woman from Adam's rib.

Staying on the subject of religion, students must need religious guidance, and just about anyone will justify this need. A bill that passed out of a subcommittee would allow schools to employ without salary or remuneration a chaplain, not to be confused with Charlie Chaplin (who may be a better choice). The chaplain does not need to "have a license, endorsement, certification, authorization or statement of recognition issued by the board of educational examiners." But if you're thinking that this would be some sort of cool job where you could dress in black and talk to students freely, beware. The position does require a background check.

The amusement and entertainment provided by the Iowa Legislature is free of charge to watch. If the governor is not speaking, seats are available without reservations. The cost of this enjoyment comes when you check your rights at the basement door.

—Marty Ryan worked for 26 years as a lobbyist at the Iowa Capitol, where he was equally horrified and entertained.

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# Drowning state government

**B**y now you have probably heard that Iowa governor Kim Reynolds wants to eliminate the income tax. You have probably heard about the taxpayer relief fund. What is happening may be a bit of a mystery, so let's dig into it.

By law, the governor and the legislature can budget only 99% of the general funds that are collected. The state must have a balanced budget and cannot go into debt to pay its bills.

If the receipts coming into state government fall short, rainy-day funds fill in the gap. Think of this as money in a savings account. There are actually two reserve accounts: the cash reserve fund which is used to support cash flow needs that occur day-in and day-out, and the Iowa economic emergency fund to be used for many years the legislature and governor have been setting budgets that use less than 99% of the collected general fund revenues. The difference between what has been collected and what has been budgeted has been deposited in the taxpayer relief fund. The money in this fund has been growing over the last ten years, to the point that the governor announced in September of 2023 that the balance was 2.74 billion dollars. What this means is that the state is collecting revenues and not spending them on services, even though the public is asking for more money to be spent on things like improving water quality, parks and recreation, nursing home inspections, public schools, and support for public colleges and universities.

The state income tax is on a path to be reduced to a flat tax. Every year the tax rates will be ratcheted downward so that by tax year 2028, the individual income tax will be

2.5%. Corporate income tax rates are also being lowered.

There are calls from legislators to ratchet the income tax rates downward at a faster speed than is currently in the Iowa Code. A bill SF552, which was introduced in 2023 and is still active this year, will do just that. As part of the process, the money in the taxpayer relief fund is going to be used to pay the state's expenses as the income rates are further decreased. Eventually the money in the taxpayer relief fund will hit zero.

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fund will hit zero.

State income revenues are already falling, and they will continue to fall as the income tax rates continue to fall. The governor is gambling that the sales tax will grow as people spend more on taxable goods and less on income tax and that will offset the loss of income tax.

But what if they don't balance each other out? At some point, if the revenues do not support the budget needs of the state, the budget will be cut, along with the services Iowans expect and the staff performing the work. Or some other tax will have to be increased. Iowans are currently seeing needed services going underfunded or not funded at all. Things could get worse, much worse.

The governor has been saying that she wants to reduce the income tax to zero by the time her current term of office ends in 2026. That plan would ratchet down the income tax rates faster than what is contemplated

in bill SF552. In fact, the governor stated during an interview on the Ruthless podcast, "you've got Republican governors that are trying to outdo each other, so that's why I've got to come back and cut taxes again," according to an article by Patrick Gleason in Forbes Magazine on August 15, 2023.

The governor is in the process of drowning state government in a bathtub right before our eyes. Prairie Progressive readers who want their tax dollars spent on infrastructure, public education, mental health services, improved water quality, and more nursing home inspections can call her office at 515-281-5211.

*—Pam Mackey Taylor is the Director of the Iowa Chapter of the Sierra Club.*

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# A strategy with a long history

The death of Norman Lear got me thinking back to my blue-collar days. In 1972 I was a Teamster, working in the Inland-Ryerson Steel warehouse in Kansas City. “All in the Family” was in its second season and the topic of TV shows came up one day as we were taking our lunch break. My foreman Jerry remarked: “The only guy on TV who carries a lunch box to work is Archie Bunker, and the only reason he’s on TV is so they can make fun of him.” Jerry never saw himself and his world reflected positively on TV.

In that job I also saw first-hand how easy it is to practice racial discrimination in employment. The warehouse manager had called in a couple of job applicants for interviews for a new position loading and unloading trucks. One of the applicants was black. Before making a decision, the manager called Jerry into his office. He asked Jerry how he thought the black guy would work out and Jerry told him he “didn’t think we’d have much to talk about.” That was enough of a clue to the manager; not wanting any source of tension in the warehouse, he hired the other guy. Discrimination was (and is) so easy, so difficult to prove or litigate.

In the 50 years since, television has become somewhat more reflective of the broader society, but in many ways we are in a much worse position. Racial discrimination in housing, education, and employment persists, yet because there are laws against it many white Americans think it is no longer a problem. And the media have become instruments of division. Conservative moguls and Republican operatives saw an opportunity in the simmering resentment on the part of the working class over being left out or

made fun of, watching their hard work create soaring wealth for the upper class while real wages stagnated. They underwrote the development of an impressive infrastructure to promote an alternate reality, misdirecting attention away from the real source of the problems facing workers. It served their purposes to foster racism, a strategy with a long history. The very concept of race and racial differences, in fact, can be traced back centuries ago to the need for the economic powers in Europe to rationalize colonial empires that thrived on the exploitation of Africans and others.

What we have now is a powerful infrastructure for implementing the divide and conquer strategy that has served the wealthy and the powerful so well. It required some investment (TV news, radio networks, conservative think tanks and legislation mills) and a helping hand from deregulation to end the fairness doctrine and allow consolidation of news outlets and the flourishing of media conglomerates. Along came social media to serve as an echo chamber, with the added benefit of undermining the business model of traditional newspapers that, for all their biases, at least practice something recognizable as professional journalism.

What makes the right-wing narrative so effective? It is a simple story that appeals to the life experiences of the listeners, and it has a villain – in fact, many villains. This narrative tells the white working class (rightly) that they have been getting screwed and (wrongly) that the villains are everyone who doesn’t look or talk like them: highly educated liberals, immigrants, black and brown people, Asians, Jews, Muslims. That many of those “villains” have been getting

screwed even worse is not part of the story because the point is to insulate the powerful and foster division, not to engender solidarity.

It doesn’t have to be like this. A multi-racial politics has played a role in achieving progressive advances in the past and could do so again. When working people of all colors and national origins join forces with allies from the white-collar middle class, they are a force to be reckoned with. But over the past thirty years, the Democratic party has drifted away from its roots as the party of the working class; it’s done little to bolster workers’ rights and collective bargaining, taking the union vote for granted. The right has been happy to fill the void, peeling off much of the white working class with their divide and conquer strategy.

The importance of this has been emphasized by Black writers such as Heather McGhee in her book *The Sum of Us*. She recounts how the effort to unionize an auto plant in the South was heading towards success, with a majority of the multi-racial workforce supporting a union. Then the company started sowing division, granting small privileges to white workers and suggesting that a union would take those away. Sadly, this strategy succeeded by energizing the racial animus already there in at least a portion of the white workforce.

I sometimes wonder if the Democratic party even knows how to talk to the working class anymore. What should a counter-narrative look like? Hint: making white workers the villains is not the solution. More to follow in *The Prairie Progressive*.

—Peter Fisher is the former research director at Common Good Iowa.

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# Nuclear disarmament: get a grip

There is not much traction in Iowa for nuclear disarmament causes. Iowans are occupied with a state government taking public money away from public school systems and giving it to private ones. In several important ways Iowa is becoming a paternalistic, uneducated, and cruel place to live, and that occupies a lot of our bandwidth. All the same time, Iowans know the risk posed by nuclear weapons. If used, they could disrupt society all over the globe. Few, if any, people want that.

“Presidential leadership may be the most important factor that determines whether the risk of nuclear arms racing, proliferation, and war will rise or fall in the years ahead,” Daryl G. Kimball, Executive Director of the Arms Control Association wrote. Most Iowans are aware of the existential threat posed by nuclear weapons. However, they don’t vote for a president based on nuclear weapons policy positions. In fact, Republicans no longer write a national platform, so who knows what their policies are? Elections today have become more tribal in nature and much less issue oriented.

A lot is at stake regarding nuclear weapons proliferation during the 2024 election. As the primary season began in Iowa, the expected nominees for president are Joe Biden and Donald Trump. We have a good idea how they will address nuclear weapons-related issues based on their past behavior. Biden would follow time-tested methods of controlling nuclear weapons at home and abroad: through negotiations, treaties, and agreements with nuclear armed states and with those like Iran and North Korea that develop nuclear weapons capabilities. Trump is belligerent and it’s hard to know what he would do. The uncertainty

about his potential actions if elected president is itself a nuclear risk. A crucial factor in whether one of today’s nuclear challenges erupts into a full-scale crisis, unravels the nonproliferation system, or worse will be the outcome of the U.S. presidential election.

“Russian President Vladimir Putin’s full-scale attack on Ukraine and threats of nuclear use have raised the specter of nuclear conflict,” Kimball said. “To his credit, Biden has not issued nuclear counterthreats and has backed Ukraine in its struggle to repel Russia’s invasion.”

Well before Putin’s nuclear rhetoric regarding Ukraine, Trump engaged in an exchange of taunts with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in 2017. In response, North Korea pursued its own nuclear weapons program, creating more risk of a nuclear detonation.

Trump hasn’t seen a long-standing international agreement he likes. The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty expires in 2026. Trump didn’t agree to an extension in 2021 when he was in office. Biden extended it by five years, just under the wire. If elected, Trump seems unlikely to sign a new agreement with Russia. Biden, on the other hand, proposed new talks with Russia on a post-2026 nuclear arms control framework. The war in Ukraine seems likely to delay progress on such talks.

In November, senior Chinese and U.S. officials held the first arms control talks in years. Progress seems possible with Biden. Trump? Not so much.

Iranian leaders continue to increase capabilities to produce weapons-

grade uranium in response to Trump’s 2018 decision to withdraw unilaterally from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. He proposed imposing tougher U.S. sanctions to pressure Iran into negotiating a new deal. They now are threatening to pull out of the NPT if the United States or other UN Security Council members snap back international sanctions against Iran, according to Kimball.

The U.S. has not ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. The Trump administration did not help when in 2018 it declared the U.S. did not intend to ratify the treaty, and in 2020 when senior Trump officials discussed resuming explosive testing to intimidate China and Russia. Biden, on the other hand, has reaffirmed U.S. support for the treaty; and his team proposed technical talks on confidence-building arrangements at the former Chinese, Russian, and U.S. test sites.

How do nuclear disarmament activists get a grip on the need to disarm, both in the U.S. and abroad? Article VI of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty already called for elimination of nuclear weapons. The question is one of political will. On that, we look to the November elections to see if the country will have any.

—Paul Deaton is the Solon correspondent for *The Prairie Progressive*.

But what then is capital punishment but the most premeditated of murders, to which no criminal's deed, however calculated it may be, can be compared? For there to be equivalence, the death penalty would have to punish a criminal who had warned his victim of the date at which he would inflict a horrible death on him and who, from that moment onward, had confined him at his mercy for months. Such a monster is not encountered in private life.

—Albert Camus, “Reflections on the Guillotine”



The leader of genius must have the ability to make different opponents appear as if they belong to one category.

—Hitler

The hard part is to keep people always at the window because of the spectacle you put on for them. And you must do this for years.

—Mussolini

We learn from history that we do not learn from history.

—Hegel

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**A factory of injustice  
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been introduced in the legislature to track trans people on state ID documents and justify separate-but-equal treatment, the Johnson County Democratic Central Committee met to consider a resolution of censure against the county attorney. My word limit precludes me from comprehensively addressing the incident. Nonetheless it is emblematic of where we are situated now in Iowa as people committed to promoting justice.

The censure vote failed by a 34-13 margin. The focus must now shift to the future. And that future matters, especially with bills flying out of the Capitol weekly that diminish our rights and degrade our humanity. We must consider carefully the methods, means, and goals of how to proceed.

I am no grand protest strategist, but I know from experience that some methods are effective, while others are alienating and divisive. Right now, many good people may not care about that. Too many blows have been taken by transgender and other targeted communities; too many insults have been borne for them to give a damn if they are alienating or sympathetic to the larger voting public.

But the problem is, if we don't care and proceed with care, we'll fail in our efforts. And if we fail in our efforts... well, there's no end to what the governor and her legislative goons will do. The calculus of consequences is terrible, and I hate it, but we must all become adept at it if we are to regain the upper hand in our ethically upended state.

—*Kim Painter is the Johnson County Recorder.*

Contact your Iowa State Senator:  
515-281-3371

Contact your Iowa State Representative:  
515-281-3221

Contact the Iowa Governor:  
515-281-5211



**Feb 15**

Iowa City Federation of Labor annual chili supper  
6:00pm, 2401 Scott Blvd.

**Feb 29**

DVIP annual soup supper  
5:00pm, Hyatt Hotel, Coralville

**March 12, 1999**

Poland, Czech Republic,  
and Hungary joined NATO

**March 18, 1969**

Kissinger's secret bombing  
of Cambodia began

**Mar 21**

Jo Co Dems Legacy Club  
Coralville Public Library  
Guest speaker:  
Kathie O'Bradovich,  
Iowa Capitol Dispatch  
Info: [wm.gerhard@gmail.com](mailto:wm.gerhard@gmail.com)

**March 23**

Johnson Co. Dem Convention  
Iowa City High School

**March 28, 1979**

Nuclear accident at  
3-Mile Island

**April 3, 2009**

Iowa Supreme Court legally  
recognized same-sex marriage

**April 23, 1974**

Republican Gov. Bob Ray  
signed the Public Employment  
Relations Act giving public  
sector workers the right to  
bargain collectively

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