**How to Reach Voters, by Mike Miller. *the liberal democrat*, January 1963.**

*Amateurs, Pros, and a Strategy for the Club Movement*

Last month Marshall Windmiller’s article on the California Democratic Council created widespread discussion – and criticism. Next month Windmiller will publish some further observations on CDC. This month Mike Miller, who predicted the Nixon strategy in the June liberal democrat, argues that the pros and cons have some grave weaknesses that the club movement is not taking advantage of.

“Issues” versus “people” appears, in the current debate among Democratic party activists, as the fundamental division between two styles of politics within the party. The issues outlook is portrayed as an orientation toward abstract ideals and goals. According to those who cast the division in these terms, the issue orientation is the view of the middle-class volunteer worker who is active in the “club movement.” He is the “amateur.” Drawn to politics by moral concerns, his view of the world is colored by ideologically tinted glasses through which he distorts the “real world.”

Counterposed to him, in this formulation, is the professional – the man of power. Oriented toward people and “getting things done,” he lives in the rough-and-tumble world of day-to-day problems in which ideological concerns are irrelevant to the practice of politics. The professional is the broker who brings together various interests, juggles them, plays them against one another, strikes compromises between then – all in the interest of developing public policy. In the process, he is building a political organization which can dispense jobs and other favors to those who help keep the operation going.

Is this a proper way of stating the debate? It is not. It obscures more than it clarifies. Let us look at the real nature of the division.

The middle-class liberals and moderates who are the bulk of reform club activity have chosen issues to debate in their councils which have thus far isolated them from the vast bulk of working-class, elderly, and minority-group people in California. Furthermore, the style associated with their politics, while proclaimed to be grass roots, does little to reach the grass roots of these groups – even when issues relevant to them are discussed and good resolutions passed. Specifically the California Democratic Council has failed to develop any sustained drive to organize within minority and working-class communities. Questions of foreign policy and civil liberties, while undeniable important, have occupied far too much of CDC time, and they do not move people in these important groups. The reason is quite simple: their problems are so immediate, so personal, so demanding, that however likely World War III may be, they are going to remain busy with their immediate problems.

It is because the political pros are sensitive to these needs that they are able to build a base in these districts. The basis of the exchange is simple: talented young people from the neighborhood see the professional organization as a route for their own social mobility. It is also the only available avenue for those who genuinely are interested in giving political representation to their constituents. From the point of view of the pro, such a person, rising in the district, either sponsored by the pro to begin with or brought into the professional organization as he rises, is essential to the success of the organization. He provides the organization with access to the district. He Is a symbol of the district to its residents, and has contact with the indigenous organizations of the district. Through him, the organization gains control of a district, and, at the same time, provides the district with jobs, help with problems, and other services. It is not, and makes no pretense at being, a democratic operation. Its function is to serve immediate needs facing people in their day-to-day lives in the community.

What is commonly not stated, however, is that the problems of these people are also issues: unemployment, discrimination, education, medical care, and so forth. The problems of individual people, when they occur many times, and when there is a notion of a public solution to these problems, become political issues if they are offered as fare for public debate. To say, as did one professional recently, that the people of minority districts aren’t interested in issues but in jobs and discrimination is to assume that these are not issues. The pros have, historically, been able to capitalize on the failure of middle-class liberals to state these problems as issues, to deal concretely with them in the districts where they are most seriously felt, and to approach the people terms relevant to them. The professional organization, generally a combination of financial interests (sometimes of less than legal character) and a lower-working-class population base, is able to maintain its own personnel in these districts and keep the district closed off from the middle-class reformers.

There are, however, two fundamental weaknesses to the “professional” approach. (1) It is the kind of coalition that frequently precludes the adoption of programs which can meet the needs of the people. (2) It is the kind of organization that frustrates the desire of people to participate in the decisions which shape their destiny. To elaborate on each of these, seldom is the professional organization or professional politician without ties to financial interests which are opposed to programs that seek in a fundamental way to deal with the problems of poverty and discrimination. In California, where savings and loan interests play a significant role in Democratic politics, it would be interesting to see how a measure for increasing public housing by state financing would do in the Legislature. The private financial interests backing the professional will resist public intervention in social problems that bear on their concerns – unless, as in present urban-renewal schemes, they are the ones who benefit. This is the sore point of the pros, the weak point at which they can be attacked, the breaking point of their coalition. What this means for the club movement is that it must state as public issues – as political programs – the problems facing individual people in the racial-minority groups of California, in the trade-union movement, and among the aged. Yet doing this will not be sufficient if not accompanied by another strategy –one directed at the other weakness of the pros.

If it is true that the professional organization – the “machine” to those who find nothing of value in it – frustrates the desire of people to actively shape their own destinies, it is nevertheless true, that the organization brings people one step closer to decision-making than they have ever been before. The fact that the club movement does not seek to organize in these areas – does not hire the type of staff personnel who could, because of their own experiences, ethnic background, and orientation –organize in these districts is the source of an inability to exploit the second weakness of the pros. The relation of the citizen to the government process is always mediated by groups. Since the CDC has few groups in the districts I am talking about, the citizen in these districts will have little feeling of identification with CDC. Since the pros are there, with their representatives, and in person, at least the citizen can say he knows someone who can help him politically, or he knows someone who knows someone who can help him via politics. Now this is a far cry from being able to say he is participating in developing a program that will help him; but in the absence of group structures which allow him to say this, he is better off with the organization than with nothing, and will remain loyal to it until someone challenges its ability to meet the needs of its supporters. Sometimes the challenge comes from a new, aspiring pro, one who steps in a vacuum left by one who has already made it to the top and who has lost the drive and commitment to people that is characteristic of the well-functioning old-school politician. Less frequently, the challenge comes from those with the vision to build a new type of organization, one in which the people seek to solve their own problems by their cooperative effort at democratic decision-making. This is the hardest solution of all. It requires endless patience on the part of an organizer, whether he is paid or a volunteer. It requires an understanding that people are most interested in what immediately affects them, and that they are unlikely to participate in an organization unless it promises to deal with some of their immediate problems.

Especially for those of us with global concerns, for those who live in constant awareness of the shadow of the bomb, of the psychological and cultural malaise in our land, and of the growing power of the military-industrial complex and its relation to the ultra-right, it may seem mundane indeed to be organizing among people whose first concern is with their local school, the failure of the city to pave their streets and provide adequate lighting, the policeman on the beat – let him be someone to be viewed with comfort rather than fear – the fight for adequate housing, or whatever else might hang heavily over their daily lives.

It may be – if we will only look politically, in power terms, at the immensity of the problem before us – that we will find a relation between all these things. But we will find it only if we are there with the people in their fights, helping them build their own organizations, democratically conceived and prosecuted, and building on a basis of equality in alliance with other grass-roots organizations. If CDC fails to do these things, to learn from the people as well as to “talk sense to them,” it is doomed to be increasingly isolated from the centers of decision-making in California. We are approaching a time when this isolation is a real possibility – a time of crisis for, at least, the liberals in CDC. But a crisis is composed of two elements: one is danger, the other is opportunity.