

Organizing, Who Divides Whom, and the "Social Issues"

By Mike Miller

How do minorities with particular interests pursue those interests in ways that further their aims yet don't give enemies of their broader interests "divide and conquer" opportunities? This question has plagued those concerned with social and economic justice since the mid-1960s when Alabama's racist Governor, George Wallace, won striking support in northern white working class precincts in his first run for Democratic Party nomination for the Presidency of the U.S.

The steady drift rightward of the country's politics is in part the result of proposals, demands, tactics and strategies of militant minority group organizations. Is it time for a new approach? Can we afford to offer "wedge issues" to conservatives whose broader agenda is dismantling government as a mechanism for social and economic justice, whose market mantra recognizes no contradiction between concentration of wealth and income and meaningful political democracy?

This editorial does not deal with the legitimacy of any particular claim. It can be assumed that any group making a claim in the public arena believes in its morality. The question raised here has to do with consequences of action. The clear fact is that, for the last forty years, those opposed to broader claims for social and economic justice, particularly those opposed to any government role in furthering these claims, have been able to use some minority claims and turn them into divisive "wedge issues."

There is nothing easy about this question. From mid-1962 to the end of 1966, I was on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee ("Snick"). SNCC was unquestionably the cutting edge of racial change in the Deep South. Few outside the South questioned the moral standing of the organization's demands for change. Yet many, including most of the civil rights movement, questioned the

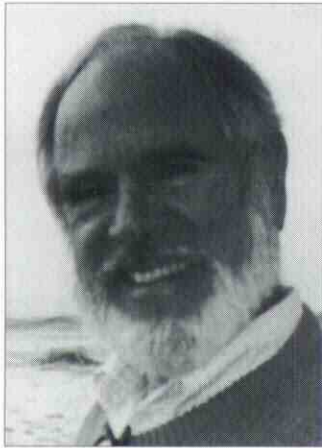
organization's tactics. SNCC was unquestionably militant. It is hard to imagine that the Voting Rights Act of 1965 would have been passed, and that strong Justice Department implementation procedures would have been adopted, without militant action in the South by SNCC and Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The constant claim by some liberals and by "moderates" was that this militant action was creating a backlash. In retrospect, that allegation is at the very least questionable and, more likely, incorrect.

At the same time, it should be recognized that the southern civil rights movement's demands were supported by a majority of Americans. Equal access to public accommodations and non-discriminatory voter registration were majority-supported issues. It was southern racists who were on the defensive and who, in a relatively short period of time, were politically defeated.

In the country as a whole, the civil rights movement's demands, as well as those of the anti-poverty, women's and gender orientation, disabled and other movements that were in part inspired by the civil rights movement, often lacked that kind of majority support. Affirmative action, school bussing, parts of the poverty program, welfare rights, guaranteed annual income, unlimited access to abortion, and similar demands and proposals met strong resistance in white working and middle class communities. No doubt Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and both George Bushes used this resistance for their own political ends. In the coming election, George W. Bush has already staked out "gay marriage" as the wedge issue of 2004.

As minorities were defeated in legislative arenas, they increasingly relied on courts to achieve their aims. The allegation that courts were doing more than defending

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individual rights won support from the American electorate. The Supreme Court became a favorite target of the right, as did lower Federal Courts across the country for their decisions on bussing, affirmative action and other "class action" claims that were made before them. Proponents of rights were successfully portrayed as elitists, unwilling to trust the American people. Indeed some of them were quite explicit in their distrust of the electorate.

Anti-government forces gutted regulatory agencies, weakened individual rights, drastically de-funded government programs that met the needs of the poor, children and other minorities, and created conditions for corporate and individual greed that are unsurpassed in American history. And they harmed the interests of minorities as well. It is time for a reassessment.

SINGLE-ISSUE/ SINGLE-CONSTITUENCY GROUPS

Groups that are singly focused on the claims of either a specific group or single issue should be engaged in conversation with others who are not hostile to their general aims but may take exception to particular claims. Here is a principle to consider: if a group agrees not to pursue its "maximum agenda" in the political arena, it has a right to expect formal and/or informal support from groups who otherwise aren't directly involved in its issues and concerns.

Here's another approach to consider: leaders of particular constituency groups should invite leaders of other constituency groups to "pre-agenda" conversations in which they share the burdens their people now seek to address in the political arena. Behind political demands are real people who experience real pain because of present laws, regulations and appropriations—or because of their absence. What are these stories of pain? Who are the human beings who live them? Stereotypes of "The Other" are best broken by making The Other a real person.

"PROGRESSIVES"

Some progressive "multi-issue" organizations are well situated to be convenors of the conversations proposed above, but they will have to hold political correctness in abeyance and learn to listen as well as to teach (or preach?!). Some moderates are also in a position to be such convenors, but they will have to reach out to those they have in the past considered "too radical." Similarly, moderate and progressive legislators, who have supported causes dear to particular groups, are in the position to jointly convene these conversations.

Political progressives and principled liberals have been firm allies of a wide range minority group causes. They have the legitimacy to convene people to look past immediate claims at the consequences of their full, uncompromising, pursuit. But moderates who have ultimately "come around" to causes they resisted need to be part of the mix as well.

MULTI-ISSUE, BROADLY-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Faced with the divisive character of the social issues, broadly-based, multi-issue, organizations have steered away from anything that might lead them into troubled waters. The general principles are, "we agree to disagree on the 'social issues'" and "we pursue issues that divide us outside the framework of our broadly-based community organizations."

There is a danger here. These multi-issue organizations have developed elaborate conversations about values and interests that allow them to unite previously divided constituencies. They develop relationships of mutual confidence and trust that cross historic lines of division. If they ignore highly polarized, divisive, issues are they abandoning the political terrain and leaving it to the religious right?

There was an excellent example of this in California a few elections ago. An anti-immigrant initiative was on the state ballot. Most of the broadly-based community

organizations in the state shied away from involvement. But in one organization, leaders from a few churches with large immigrant memberships approached "Anglo" working-class and middle-class religious leaders in the organization and said, "this issue is important to our people. We've spent a lot of time developing a consensus on our shared values. Now's the time to apply those values to this issue. 'Your people' know 'our people;' let's get together and think this thing through." The result was a voter education, registration and get-out-the-vote drive that made a demonstrable difference in the "white precincts" in which it took place.

DIVIDE THE RIGHT

In several areas there should be opportunities for people concerned with economic and social justice who are in multi-issue organizations to create "wedge issues" to isolate the right:

- Taxes for needed programs paid by those who can most afford them. Ironically, a major debate is now going on in Alabama where Republican, evangelical, Governor Tom Riley is proposing tax reform on exactly this principle—and causing consternation in the Christian Coalition.
- Vigorous government action against corporate fraud, concentration of power in self-perpetuating corporate boards of directors, uncontrolled corporate power in general and other uses of government to control the so-called "free market."
- New initiatives in areas that are now monopolized by the right, such as a massive reform program of adoption and foster home-care programs. Individual households and private and nonprofit agencies alone lack the capacity to provide adequate funding for decent foster care programs. Government has the capacity to support retreat centers for pregnant women who might be willing to have a child if they were confident of his or

her future, and who would receive some economic support during a period when they took a leave from their employment to give birth to a child.

NOT AN EASY PROBLEM TO SOLVE

I do not want to suggest that the difficulty we face is easily solved. Nor should this be taken as a disguised way of backing Democrats. (In the '60s, it was Democrat President-appointed Federal Court judges in the South who were among the biggest obstacles to desegregation, and it was Republican appointees whose decisions created organizing space for the civil rights movement.) Dialog, relationships that cut across barriers of isolation and fragmentation, mutual respect and a "live and let live" attitude are the beginning point. We should have the confidence that when people of good will gather on these terms they will find solutions to the knottiest of problems. †

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