**What’s Next?**

**Thoughts on the Bernie Sanders Campaign.**

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**Preface**

The Bernie Sanders for President campaign filled a deep malaise that now permeates the country. It provided an outlet not just for the pain of economic insecurity and deprivation, now experienced by a growing number of Americans, and their growing anger at the “1%”—both of which were central to Sanders’ speeches, but also for despair about the future, apprehension over looming environmental disaster, fear of terrorists, and underlying it all a sense of powerless to do anything about any of it, and the lack of any meaningful community to provide support in difficult times.

These are not new problems. They are only now coming into sharper focus. The vacuum that Sanders sought to fill on the Democratic Party side was filled for many by Donald Trump. But it is not on him that I want to focus here.

What will fill this space in people’s lives? For the past almost 60 years, I have hoped, believed and devoted my energy to the proposition that people power community organizing, along with a renewed labor movement, would rise to the occasion. Others became involved in electoral or major national issue campaigns, which I thought of as mobilizing as distinct from organizing, as the vehicle to bring about a more just society. Neither of us is wining.

These thoughts are part of a long-simmering shift in my either-or view of these two approaches (organizing and mobilizing). Perhaps at some point in the future they will merge in a new national federation of justice-committed organizations that has the power to shape the future of the country. If it is to happen at all, this development is a good distance down the road. In the meantime, I think people who share commitments to social and economic justice, environmental sanity, ending the world-wide power of concentrated wealth, mutually respectful relations among nations and ending the endless war now going on in the world need to be moving on two separate tracks while seeking ways to make them mutually supportive rather than mutually exclusive.

Here I look at the electoral mobilization track, and offer suggestions to Sanders and his associates. At the conclusion of these thoughts I will suggest ways for community organizers to think about the point at which we now find ourselves in this country.

**Introduction**

We can go back many years and find Democratic Party presidential campaigns that released the energy of youthful activism, and gave voice to significant sectors of the electorate. Most lost—either in the Convention or in the general election (McCarthy, McGovern, Jackson, et al), though one (Obama) won. Many, if not all, promised that after the election they would create an organization that would give continuing voice to that energy and protest. Rarely did they do so, and when they did the voice became a whisper.

The common call from activists during those campaigns was for a post-election “grassroots organization”. They confused campaigns and mobilizing with organizing, and themselves with “the people”. Indeed, many of them called their electoral mobilizations “organizing”.

The post-Sanders campaign effort can offer the first step toward the second modern realignment of American politics: getting corporate influence and neoliberal ideology out of the Democratic Party. The first realignment got racists (the Dixiecrats) officially out of the Party.

**What Is To Be Done?**

A “campaign organization” should be created, and it should be “top-down” in character. All effective campaigns are top-down, no matter how “bottom-up” their origins might be. A target is set; the goal is defined (winning an election; getting a bill passed; negotiating a contract or agreement); there is a deadline; resources are mobilized—talent, money and foot soldiers—to achieve the goal. Then the campaign ends. The most democratic organization in the world runs campaigns this way if it wants to win. And please abandon all hope of educational results from losing campaigns. For everyday people losing simply confirms that good causes don’t win.

Bernie Sanders should be at the top of this campaign organization. Like it or not, at election time Americans gather around personalities who give voice to their hopes and fears, their aspirations and interests. Further, as a result of his campaign, Sanders has the moral standing to draw together the various interests and personalities that must be part of a broadly-based progressive electoral movement. Finally, he has the clout to isolate if need be those whose individual interests lead to posturing, tactical moves designed to maximize their position in the new political climate that might be emerging. None of which is to say things should remain this way. As I hope will be made clear in what follows, I imagine down the road a convention every bit as democratic as any that any reader is likely to be able to imagine that will be the permanent sovereign body of this effort.

In the interim, the decision-making body of the campaign organization should be an “organizing committee” made up of *respected leaders*, as distinct from media created “leaders”, from the diverse demographic and organizational constituencies needed to create progressive populist majorities: men/women/LGBTQ, racial/ethnic minorities, white “ethnics” and “Anglos”; blue-white-professional collar occupations, and small business; old, young and in-between. Labor, religious, professional, interest, identity, political and other organizations, plus, perhaps, highly respected public intellectuals, entertainers and athletes. In a moment, I will deal with the problem of getting all these people to the table.

A significant number of representatives from the activists, chosen by them, should be part of this decision-making body. Their voices deserve magnification in the organizing committee because they do the work of campaigns.

This body should be as large as is necessary to achieve the representativeness that is required. Since that representativeness does not now exist in the Sanders operation, nor in his electoral base (the African-American electorate is emblematic of the problem), the body necessarily should be a “temporary organizing committee” with an open-ended number of seats to be filled as constituencies now absent decide this is where they’d like to make their political home. It is far better to have an empty seat to be filled that to pick a “representative” who really only represents him/herself. The real representatives remain people to be convinced. I imagine a body in the thousands.

The platform of this new organization should be the one on which Sanders ran his campaign, with these tweaks: it was sometimes, though not always, tone-deaf to the concerns of particular identities in American life—women, minorities, others. Without losing the focus on economic inequality, the economic squeeze on growing numbers of Americans, the power of the present economic oligarchy and variations on that theme, the organization has to also recognize particular claims of particular groups. Secondly, clearer vision of an alternative role for the U.S. in the world needs to be stated. Whatever constitutes a return to FDR’s “good neighbor policy” needs to be articulated so that our endless ventures in places where we should not be will be terminated. Third, a greater emphasis on the environmental disaster facing us needs to take place, accompanied by a program of job transition for workers who will be displaced if sound environmental policies are adopted.

The organization should replicate itself in major metropolitan areas across the country, with the same temporary character to each initial decision-making body. Together, the top 15 metropolitan areas of the country hold a majority of the country’s population. Organizing by metro area rather than state has significant benefits for face-to-face meetings—which still trump electronic media for building commitment.

The organization should select some combination of legislative and electoral, in particular House of Representatives, campaigns to demonstrate and grow its strength. My focus would be on unseating blue-dog Democrats to begin the second realignment of the Democratic Party, and student debt relief both because the benefits would reach a large constituency and the target would be banks. An anti-payday lending campaign would be another good one. Others are certainly possible. Winning campaigns can be used to persuade skeptics whose heart may be with you but whose mind isn’t that they should join this camp, and its tent still has room for them to come under it.

“Lesser of two evils” politics is not to be smeared. It is the reality within which we live. The task at hand is to demonstrate that the lesser need not be so little. We can build upon that.

At some point down the road, the temporary organizing committee can have a large meeting at which it ends its temporary status and becomes more formalized. National co-chairs can be elected representing the key constituencies in the organization. The platform can be modified and brought up to date. This new group will be the party within the party until it captures the Democratic Party.

**Can It Be Done?**

The first challenge: The activists have to agree to a representational formula in which they are not the majority of the organizing committee. Representative individuals from the constituencies that were won in the election need to be drawn in to the organization. And space needs to be left for new representatives to be drawn in as new constituencies are convinced, which leads to the second point.

The second challenge: Commentator Van Jones indirectly made this point on CNN during its election coverage, and I paraphrase: “the black left can’t deliver the black vote because it’s a protest left.” His point about the black left can be made about the left/grassroots/populist/militant new Latino, Anglo, women’s, student and any other voices/groups you’d care to name. While majorities sometimes support their issue campaigns, they typically don’t vote for their candidates in elections. The activist core has to be persuaded of this reality. To cite a couple of examples of people who are exemplary of those who need to be drawn in: Congresswoman Barbara Lee was neutral in the presidential race, and John Lewis endorsed Hillary Clinton. If people like them, and, indeed, they in particular, cannot be dislodged from a neo-liberal/austerity, hawkish, centrist Democratic Party, neither the venture proposed here nor any other is likely to succeed.

The third challenge: Rome was not built in a day. The present conservative political and ideological domination nationally, and its power in local government and state legislatures; the dismantling of most of organized labor; the rollback of important civil rights movement gains…these and more were not accomplished by the political right as the result of a short-range strategy. A long-range perspective is required.

Finally, though far from being an afterthought, the money for this effort has to continued coming from hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of small donors. Big donors exercise big influence. Period. You cannot organize the kind of politics imagined here without its financial support coming from its constituencies.

**Some benchmarks to consider:**

* The time to gear-up for the 2024 presidential primaries. Conversations with people like Elizabeth Warren should begin now. If Hillary Clinton loses, the time should shift to 2020.
* Redistricting is crucial. The possibility to re-shape Congress by state ballot initiatives that create independent redistricting commissions (with mechanisms to guarantee their independence) should be explored. We need a mechanism other than the self-serving interest of incumbents who, regardless of Party, support each other to preserve themselves when it comes to drawing district lines. 2019/20 are the key years for this activity.

**Mobilizing and Organizing**

This paper is about electoral mobilization so the country can be governed from a different political framework. A majority of the American people opposes the austerity and government cuts agenda of neoliberalism, and is angry at the concentration of wealth and power now characterizing the nation. The right candidates and campaigns can win their votes.

Constituency-based organizers need to be among those consulted in an ongoing way by the people who are creating this electoral apparatus. Those of us whose focus is organizing cannot ignore the electoral or big issue campaigns arena. While mobilizers necessarily focus on winning, our focus is on building something different from the structure proposed here. We can use elections and big issue campaigns to do this.

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