A Third Party Emerges in Vermont

by Michael Parenti

IN VERMONT, in 1970, a group of anti-war activists, including persons who had worked in Eugene McCarthy's 1968 presidential campaign, formed a new political party called the "Liberty Union." Their intent was to offer a "substantive alternative" to what they felt were the evasive and otherwise conservative politics of the two major parties. In the campaigns that followed, Liberty Union candidates generally took outspokenly "radical" positions on such issues as legalized abortion, tax reform, ecology, utility rates, human services and the needs of low income people. Of the three parties, Liberty Union was the only one to call for a moratorium on nuclear power plants, immediate and total withdrawal from Indochina and drastic cuts in military spending, and the only one to attack the big corporations.

How did a traditionally conservative state like Vermont respond to an avowedly "radical" third party like Liberty Union? By way of answering that question let us take a look at Vermont itself.

I

VERMONT IS A SMALL STATE with a population of only 450,000 in an area 190 miles long and 50 miles wide. Its largest city, Burlington, with 40,000 denizens, is situated in the Lake Champlain valley where more than one-fourth of the state's population lives. A visitor to Vermont is immediately struck by the beautiful countryside which remains relatively unblemished because of laws prohibiting highway billboards and throwaway bottles. Fifty years ago, 75 percent of the land was used for farming and pasture. Today 75 percent is forest, a measure of how the small independent farmer is being driven toward extinction. On the eastern side of the state along the

Connecticut River are many mill towns which have been losing population since World War II.[1]

Unemployment in Vermont is always a few percentage points higher than the national rate. Gasoline, fuel, food and certain other commodities are priced higher than in most states, while wages are below the national average. About 85,000 Vermonters live below or close to the poverty level, many suffering from unattended medical problems, from hunger and malnutrition, substandard housing and inadequate home heating—which in Vermont's harsh climate is a special hardship. Yet welfare payments are higher than in most states and after years of agitation by low income groups, Vermont now provides one of the few state-funded dental care programs for children in the United States.

Vermont's human services, better than in many states but still grossly insufficient for the needs of its people, are financed by a regressive tax base. The percentage of state revenue derived from business taxes has been declining, while the percentage from the sales tax has risen. Tax breaks granted to business properties by local government increased from $12 million in 1965 to $81 million in 1970.[2] One reason for poverty in Vermont is clear: the poor subsidize the rich by working for low wages and paying high prices and by carrying a disproportionately greater share of the taxes.

The poor, along with students and young people in general, are underrepresented on the electoral rolls. Students and persons recently arrived from out of state, many of "progressive" persuasion, are discouraged from registering by town clerks who resist student efforts at enrollment until the last moment

[1] For much of the above information I am indebted to Todd Manley. My thanks to Cheryl Smalley and Irene Diamond for their helpful criticisms.

[2] See Lee Webb's *The Swindling of the Average Taxpayer: The Story of Taxes in Vermont* to be obtained by writing to Webb c/o Plainfield, Vermont. Webb and other members of "Vermont Alliance," a public interest group, have done a good deal of research on economic conditions in Vermont, specifically on such things as the ski industry, utilities and land use.

or who impose residency requirements that are no longer on the books—unbeknownst to many prospective voters.

A counterculture population has emerged in Vermont, consisting of ex-urbanites who have chosen the rustic life, busying themselves with gardening, chopping wood, baking bread, weaving, doing yoga and astrology, smoking pot and eating organic foods. The Black population is miniscule and of no visible concentration. There is a ghetto in Burlington with all the familiar attributes: large but fragmented families, transient males, stabilizing females, chronic alcoholism, unemployment and welfare—but the people in it are White, mostly native Protestant and some French-Canadian. Discriminatory attitudes exist against the French and against the poor in general.

There exists a spirit of state "nationalism" in Vermont of a kind seldom found in non-Southern states, an awareness of Vermont as a special entity, similar perhaps to the way Texans feel about Texas and possibly for the same reason: both Vermont and Texas were independent republics before joining the Union. "Vermont is not New Hampshire," one is told. Such expressions as "the Vermont way," and "a typical Vermonter," lose none of their popularity for being ill-defined. A bumper sticker appearing on cars reads "Vermont is a way of life." During the heady days of 1970, New Left and hippie elements in Vermont dreamt about seceding from the Union to form an independent, self-sufficient "Vermont Republic," free of pollution and big corporations. The Vermont contingent in the 1971 May Day anti-war demonstrations in Washington carried "the flag of the Vermont nation" (black, green and red, with an ecological symbol).

Out-of-staters remain out-of-staters no matter how many years they reside in Vermont. Native Vermonters are proud to inform you of their nativity. Yet it would be a mistake to think that Vermont nationalism is an attitude found only among the native born. If anything, newly arrived persons are quickly infected with the nationalist spirit, bringing to it all the fresh enthusiasms of the convert.

In a Lilliputian state like Vermont, officials are somewhat less removed than in large metropolitan areas. Without trying too hard one is likely to run into one's state representative sooner or later. A person has a good chance of getting a letter printed in the local newspaper, a gratifying experience for anyone who has spent years trying to crack the *New York Times* letter column. Organized political groups are able to get somewhat better media coverage than in a bigger, busier state, a fact which helped Liberty Union in its campaigns. News coverage of state politics is more thorough than in most states. A newscaster will begin a report with "Today the Senate passed a bill . . ." and it is to be assumed he is referring to the august body in Montpelier rather than the one in Washington. Vermont's largest TV station is owned by a conservative Republican as are most of its radio stations and its largest newspaper, the *Burlington Free Press*. Several other dailies have a fairly liberal editorial policy. The ultra-rightist William Loeb owns a weekly and a daily in the northern part of the state in whose columns he carries on his shrill crusade against the evils of Communism.

Whatever its characteristics, Vermont is not really conservative, not in the way Mississippi or Alabama are, and a third party like Liberty Union is less an anomaly than one might think. To be sure, for a century the dominant political organization has been the Republican party. The GOP's strength is concentrated in the small towns, rural areas, and among the middle class and higher income elements in the larger cities. Vermont Republicans range from extremely conservative to mildly liberal. The same might be said of the Democrats, who draw their strength both from the ex-urbanite progressives and the fundamentalist working class of Burlington, Winooski and Rutland. In recent years, Republican dominance has been badly shaken and in 1974 a Democrat was elected to the U.S. Senate for the first time. Another was re-elected Governor. The Lieutenant-Governor, Attorney General, Secretary of State and other state-wide elected officers are now

Democrats. The Democrats also won control of one house in the state legislature and substantially increased their strength in the other. In the shift away from bedrock Republicanism, Liberty Union played a small part by moving the political debate in a leftward direction.

II

UNLIKE THE TWO MAJOR PARTIES which concentrate on winning public office, Liberty Union worked *between* elections on important issues. For instance, in 1973 LU led a successful skirmish against the telephone company's attempt to increase its rates. Before the Public Service Board could grant rate increases it had to hold public hearings in various parts of the state. Usually only a few people showed up at these sessions. But LU managed to rally hundreds of angry citizens to each meeting, convincing the PSB to deny the rate increase for the time being.

In 1973 Liberty Union organized a state-wide campaign to defeat a constitutional amendment that would have extended the Governor's term of office and those of other state-wide officers from two to four years. The proposal had the support of both major parties and much of the press, but LU organizers went from town to town distributing leaflets, putting up posters, appearing on radio talk shows, denouncing the four-year term as a way of further removing the government from the people. As one LU organizer, Todd Manley, described it: "We saw this [amendment] as an arrogant attempt to further centralize power in the hands of the state, further insulate the executive branch from inhibiting pressures from the people. We threw all our effort and money, all $200 of it, into fighting this amendment, and we won."

Less successful was Liberty Union's attempt to help construction workers against the union-busting tactics of contractors. The builders wanted an open shop so they could hire non-union laborers at less than half the going rate. They made no pretense of desiring negotiations and they forced a strike.

The Democratic Governor, Tom Salmon, who had won his election with the help of labor money and support, chose to ignore the union's plight. Worse still, Salmon awarded a $2 million contract to the very construction firm that was trying to break the union. Like most Democrats, Salmon was on close terms with business interests. Realizing that they were being sold out, union leaders agreed to meet with LU organizers. LU began a campaign on behalf of the union, in the media and in demonstrations. The governor responded by appointing a fact-finding board whose recommendations he promptly ignored. Within two years the union had withered away from 1,200 members to 150.

In early 1974 some of the construction workers joined Liberty Union activists and welfare rights groups in a march to Montpelier to protest cuts in services to low income people. "Welfare" was no longer a dirty word to the unemployed workers. The head of the construction union, an articulate, self-educated man named Arthur Deloy, distinguished himself in the Montpelier action by speaking out forcefully on behalf of the demonstrators, much to the discomfort of the legislators who heard him.

These pre-election activities did not hurt Liberty Union's showing in 1974. In previous contests LU had fielded a small number of candidates and had won not more than one to three percent of the state-wide vote. In 1974 things changed noticeably: Liberty Union ran 43 local and state-wide candidates and polled from five to seven percent of the state-wide vote. Four union locals endorsed the LU ticket and two construction union members ran as LU candidates for the state legislature. Union leader Deloy was the third party's candidate for Lieutenant-Governor. The eggheads and hardhats had made an alliance.

Liberty Union began to win the serious attention of the press partly in response to the persistent demands for equal exposure made by LU Chairperson Bernard Sanders (who also ran as LU candidate for the U.S. Senate), and also because the press was

responding to the growing public interest in the party. As Liberty Union's candidate for Vermont's only seat in the U.S. House, I won the editorial endorsement of two of Vermont's more liberal dailies, much to the astonishment of everyone, including myself. Several editorial writers noted how LU candidates were making a creative contribution to the campaign by bringing much needed fresh ideas to a troubled polity and by confronting issues in ways that the two major parties seldom did. By election time there was talk among some pundits that Vermont was becoming a "three-party state."

The Liberty Union vote included not only anti-war progressives, hippies, students and intellectuals but also many low income, working class people. In Rutland, for instance, I received five percent of the vote in the middle class districts but ten percent in the lower income districts. In Burlington, in low income areas where LU candidates like Joyce Bressler were active in community organizing, the LU vote ran as high as twenty-five percent.

III

LIBERTY UNION'S UPSWING can be ascribed to several factors. First, a number of LU candidates proved to be articulate proponents of protest. If in previous elections some LU people prided themselves on their "rebellious" personal styles, and some continued to in 1974, yet other of the party's candidates were treating themselves more seriously and in turn were less often treated as oddities by voters. LU was also the only party with fifteen women on the ticket, including two who ran for state-wide office: Martha Abbott, the gubernatorial candidate, a tireless, twenty-four-year-old activist and one of the founders of the party; and Nancy Kaufman, the candidate for Attorney General, a young lawyer who worked hard for low income groups and against utility rate increases.

Second, in 1974, unlike previous elections, LU had some semblance of an organization. As many as twenty-four or more unpaid workers put out two campaign issues of a LU newspaper,

distributed thousands of pieces of campaign literature and raised "substantial" funds. A nationally known rock performer, Bonnie Raitt, agreed to do a benefit which netted about $4,000 for the party, most of which was spent on a handful of short television political advertisements. (The ads were produced at no cost by a two-man professional TV advertising company sympathetic to the party.)

Third, the worsening economy and the general post-Watergate waning of faith in established institutions left many people open to the kind of critique offered by a protest party. Along with the public's sense of crisis was the feeling that neither of the major parties was addressing the salient issues of the day. To cite one example: at a time when Vermonters were enraged about the astronomical rate increases being granted to the utility companies, the Democratic and Republican candidates for governor declared that utility rates would not be an issue in the 1974 contest. In contrast, Liberty Union candidates pounded away at the utilities, calling for public ownership, organizing citizen groups to voice their protests and hold referendums, publicizing the fact that Vermont utilities were owned by rich out-of-state corporations and not by Vermont widows and orphans.

It is one thing to say that major party candidates "fail to address themselves to the issues"; it is something else to share public platforms with the major candidates as I did for many weeks and listen to their assertions about their leadership qualities and their endless devotion to Vermont and the nation. It is stupefying to hear candidate after candidate, Democrat after Republican, gingerly touch upon minor issues ("Many of us feel that Route 7 needs improvement"), mouth generalities about a few of the more serious problems ("There's no doubt that inflation has us all concerned"), give voice to the unexamined conventional wisdom of the day ("America must maintain its role as world leader"), take a half-step forward and then backward ("I'm for cutting the fat from our defense budget but I don't want to see our security weakened"), refer

to mysterious complexities that demand *in*action ("Now there's no easy answer to any of these questions"), and all the time utter not a word about monopoly capital at home and abroad, the class biases of public policy, the privileges of the rich and powerful, the gross injustices suffered by the poor, not a word about corruption, the CIA, utility rates, the growth of unaccountable executive power, etc.

Not a word, that is, until forced to confront such issues by Liberty Union candidates who repeatedly brought up the unpleasant realities of power, profits and privilege. In every forum they won the appreciation of their audiences for so doing. It was this enthusiastic audience response that frequently compelled the major party candidates to take account of the real issues if only to blur them further. Thus in one debate, in response to LU senatorial candidate Bernard Sander's attack on the CIA, Democrat Pat Leahy, who eventually won the U.S. Senate race, was obliged to voice his somewhat tepid "concern" about the CIA's "growing influence." Democrats and Republicans were adept at squirming around controversial questions. When Sanders attacked the power and wealth of Nelson Rockefeller, Leahy responded with these hedging comments: "There are things about Governor Rockefeller I like and things about him I don't like. In all, if elected I would vote to confirm him as Vice-President but with reservations."

For all the hopeful signs, LU still faces many of the disabilities that have plagued third parties (except the well-financed conservative ones). The lifeblood of electoral politics is money. With money one is able to buy large chunks of prime television time and pay the endless operational expenses. With money one gains exposure, voter recognition, a reliable campaign work force and a wider measure of "legitimacy." For all the talk about "radical chic" and "limousine liberals," the truth is that people with money are the least likely to contribute to a party that has declared war against their privileges and powers.

LU people found it difficult to support themselves while en-

gaging in full-time political work. Some held jobs that allowed free time for campaign activities, while others lived off unemployment insurance or personal savings. By the end of the campaign most LU people were financially and emotionally exhausted and unable to sustain any level of political organizing during the following winter. As one LU candidate charged during the election: "Politics is a rich man's game." The message hit home all too clearly.

Liberty Union also suffers from a shortage of conventionally defined mature electoral talent. To be sure, most LU people are mature and intelligent by any important standard, but most are under thirty years old, addicted to open-necked shirts, blue denim and long hair. Very few LU activists look like the prototypic "middle American." The voters, even many of the more progressive ones, want candidates to be of somewhat conventional appearance and deportment. A candidate may find self-expression in not wearing a tie and jacket or in sporting a disheveled head of hair. But voters are quick to perceive such appearances as signs of disrespect toward themselves or as indications of unreliability in the candidate. Candidates who seem not to be taking themselves seriously will not be taken seriously by the voters. I, for one, thought it best, while being iconoclastic in political substance, to be reassuringly proper in appearance.

Liberty Union candidates understood that their goal was not just to create a dialogue but to change people's political opinions and commitments and to pile up votes. An opinion that has only 2,000 votes behind it is patronized or ignored, but one that has 10,000 votes begins to be taken more seriously. Votes are not only a symptom of a party's strength, they add to the legitimacy of the political consciousness the party is trying to cultivate.

The minority status of Liberty Union, however, was a serious deterrent to the winning of votes, as were the entrenched party prejudices of the electorate. While LU candidates almost always received the warmest applause at public appearances

they received the least number of votes from the public. Although agreeing with much of the LU critique, people did not want to "waste" their vote on a party that had no chance of winning. Voting is essentially a defensive act and people are more inclined to cast their ballots for "the lesser of two evils," at least those citizens do who can perceive a substantial difference between Democratic and Republican candidates. LU consciously tried, without too much success, to combat this voter psychology by arguing that a vote for the "Democans and Republicrats" was truly wasted or, worse still, violated the voter's own interests, whereas a vote for LU would really be noticed and have an impact on changing the center of political gravity.

In most elections almost half of the qualified electorate do not bother to go to the polls, a disproportionate number of them being among the low income, the unemployed, the elderly, and the racial minorities—those who have most reason to be skeptical of the two major parties. Although it drew much of its strength from underdog groups, LU could not shake large numbers of non-voters from their disenchantment with politics and politicians. LU candidates were themselves sometimes seen as being "just another bunch of politicians" by some of the more cynical. Ironically enough, LU suffered the handicap of being tarnished by the very evil it was trying to combat.

When not being labeled "politicians" in the conventional sense, LU candidates were stigmatized for being "radicals," a term many LU people applied to themselves and their party without giving it a precise definition. In the late 1960's a radical was anyone actively against the war, in favor of substantial cuts in the military budget and a reordering of "our warped priorities," anyone critical of giant corporations and supportive of something called "People Power." "Radical" denoted an anti-establishment stance but it evaded the whole question of capitalism and socialism. Is a radical against particular abuses of capitalism as Ralph Nader might be or against capitalism as a system as are socialists? It is one thing to attack certain of the "excesses" of large corporations—with the implication that these things can be changed with better regulations and

more dedicated regulators, it is something else to attack *capitalism* as an entire system that must be transformed.

As a socialist I tried not only to discuss how bad conditions had become (and few people needed convincing on that score) but to explain *how* and *why* the politico-economic system itself created the problems that needed to be solved, and why things *had* to be much the way they were under capitalism. In short, while focusing mostly on immediate issues, I attempted now and then to move from a liberal complaint to a socialist analysis.

It was my opinion, shared by growing numbers of LU people, that a third party must pose an alternative view of society. From an analysis of how and why things are as they are, it must show how things can be organized in a fundamentally different way. I discovered that most people do not think society *should* be the way it is but that it *has* to be. Seeing no way out, they fear that an alternative might be even worse. A third party should be saying something more to these people than "throw the rascals out" and "we can do it better," even when the "we" is meant to include all working people.

While campaigning for Congress I talked about community control, worker control, and public ownership; I talked about moving away from "rule by the few" toward "rule by the many," and replacing production for profit with production for social need. When asked if this was "socialism," a term that still frightens many Vermonters, I would say "we call it democracy." Sometimes the term I used was "community democracy," or "economic democracy." I referred to "working people" rather than the "proletariat," and to "big business" rather than the "bourgeoisie." If one is dealing with an American electorate, one should use an American idiom. The idea is to develop a socialist analysis while avoiding as much as possible those bugaboo labels which paralyze people's minds.

But the very process of talking to the voters "where they're at" may have a subtle cooptive effect on those doing the talking. More than once I felt I was unable to get to the analysis that needed to be made and was simply voicing the usual muck-

raker's complaints. This is not an easily resolved problem: how to present a progressive political view that is not so "extreme" as to be rejected out of hand as "unrealistic," and "too radical." And, how, at the same time, to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the voters without so diluting the content of your political message as to become indistinct from those whom you oppose. Some LU candidates were asked by newspeople how their party differed from the other two. Some LU people had an exaggerated, almost panicky concern about "turning off the voters" by being too far left. As the candidate who took the most explicitly socialist stand, I was sometimes the focus of this concern. Yet judging from the press response and the election returns, the approach I took did no damage to the party. In fact, I led the ticket, polling almost 10,000 votes or seven percent.

IV

DO THIRD PARTIES LIKE LIBERTY UNION represent a worthwhile investment of time and energy for those interested in raising the level of political consciousness in the U.S.? I would be more inclined to say yes than no. To be sure, by entering electoral politics one lends a certain legitimacy to the very political game one is trying to expose as a charade. Furthermore, the media may grant you some access to the public but mostly on the media's own terms. The "news" is defined as a string of events, issues and personalities. At times I tried to show how these supposedly separate issues were actually linked to each other as manifestations of the same socio-economic system of power and interest. This kind of analysis was often not considered "news," for quite literally it offered nothing "new," nothing separate, distinct and novel. Besides, most of the working press has not even a rudimentary grasp of political economy. If a candidate attacked an opponent's capabilities, he was likely to get more coverage and understanding than if he offered an analysis of how deficit spending programs and foreign aid programs helped the giant corporations and were necessary features of modern capitalism.

Liberty Union candidates talked about getting working people actively engaged in political struggle but electoral politics does not really do that. As a show and a spectacle, the electoral campaign encourages passivity and spectatorism. Rather than building a people's movement, electoral politics focuses on persons and personalities.

Yet for all the drawbacks, I think Liberty Union and other such electoral movements are worth the effort. There is an immense need for political education, and the opportunities for advancing political awareness are greater today than ever. For all the mindless distractions, simplified images and engineered evasions provided by public figures and news media, the American people have not been totally benumbed. If the campaign taught me anything it is that the people have a keen sense of the injustices that assail them, even if only an imperfect idea of the causes and solutions. They are looking for explanations to the problems of this unhappy polity. An electoral campaign provides an opportunity, as do few other occasions, to expose the hypocrisies and oppressions of this society and to pose an alternative perspective and direction.

LU candidates visited all the large towns in Vermont, distributed literature at factory gates, talked to people at shopping centers, spoke at church gatherings, colleges and labor union meetings. The candidates running for state-wide offices appeared on every radio station at least once, were interviewed by the major daily newspapers and shared numerous public platforms with their two-party opponents including a few on television. However unsatisfying and frustrating it was, for all the reasons stated earlier, socialists and radicals achieved an access to the public seldom available to them in this "free marketplace of ideas." For all the handicaps we carried, portions of our message got through. Many persons not connected with our party observed that LU had a noticeably salutary impact on the range of political debate and the level of political awareness in Vermont.

Today on the political left we have (*a*) fragmented groups in various cities throughout the U.S. organizing single issue

protests, e.g., lettuce and grape boycotts and opposition to such things as the B-1 bomber, urban renewal and nuclear reactors. Each issue is taken as a cause unto itself. The politics are reactive and reformist. There is much action but little ideological development, little systematic and *systemic* analysis of why and how various abominations keep arising. (*b*) Sectarian parties which split from each other at the drop of an ideological comma, spending most of their time talking the arcane, doctrinaire language of the "true vanguard party of the proletariat." The more isolated they become from working people, the more they strive for political purity and a "correct line." There is much ideology but little action.

Liberty Union stands somewhere between these two tendencies, trying to develop a deep and broad opposition to the established elites but staying close to the concrete issues that affect people. Rather than being a vanguard party with one party line, LU is a coalition of progressives and protestors, socialists and muckrakers, with a predominantly anti-capitalist tendency. Whether the coalition develops into a political force that can create a new public consciousness remains to be seen, but if it does not, and if other political groups like it do not arise in other states, then the American people with all their justifiable anger and pain will be left to the likes of George Wallace and Ronald Reagan.

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[We began this first of our bicentennial supplements with the presupposition that a democratic society requires a citizenry educated to be capable of self government. Thoreau, as the first essay in the section has reminded us, described the tension between the will of the majority and the more abstract claims of morality. Michael Parenti has examined one consequence of this conflict in the world of practical politics. The essays which follow trace this tension into the world of education, and even into the ritual of sports in our contemporary life.]