

Ralph Nader: White Knight or Pied Piper?

Op-Ed printed in *The Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, November 2, 2000

Ralph Nader wants to win at least five percent of the national vote to qualify the Green Party for federal matching funds in the 2004 campaign, hoping to provide the means to build a permanent political watchdog for progressive causes. The recent experience of minor parties suggests a less happy outcome. Was anyone watching what happened to the Reform Party?

Membership in American political parties is wide open, leaving promising minor parties vulnerable to colonization by less successful groups from the fringes of political life, as the Reform Party discovered. If Nader were to get five percent of the vote, the Greens would be a magnet for every group of opportunists jumping ship from the battered Reform Party. First in line likely would be Lenora Fulani, leader of the political cult once called the New Alliance Party, followed by Maharishi University professor John Hagelin of the Natural Law Party. Superficially at least, the left-populist rhetoric of Fulani and the New Age nostrums of Hagelin would be a better fit with the Greens than they were with Reform.

Next in line would be the various Trotskyist sects presently biding their time in more marginal minor parties. The banners of one of these, the International Socialist Organization, were already in evidence at the pro-Nader rally outside the Presidential debate in Boston. Battles among such obscure socialist sects as the Workers World Party and its perennial candidates contributed to the decline of California's Peace and Freedom Party, which lost its ballot status last year, leaving the Greens as the only tempting alternative.

People from the farther shores of politics are present in all parties, but they become more visible, influential, and disruptive in a minor party. As we saw with the Reform Party, they often prove highly skilled in ballot access, primary battles, delegate selection, and overall political infighting.

The resulting minor party conventions become carnivals of eccentricity that drive out anyone who imagines having a serious future in electoral politics. Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura left the Reform Party in June when Pat Buchanan's forces hijacked the party. California assembly member Audie Bock, the highest-ranking public official in the country elected as a Green, dropped the party designation this year to campaign for reelection as an independent.

If Nader is able and willing to run again in 2004 at age 70, the Green Party may be able to hold itself together despite the entry of sectarian groups. But Nader has shown little interest in helping the Greens in the meantime. He refused to join the party, and has indicated he will play no role in its internal affairs.

Minor parties founder on the shoals of American politics because we have single-member legislative districts and an executive elected at large at both the state and national levels, not a proportional representation or parliamentary structure in which multi-party systems flourish. Our only example of a minor party replacing a major party is the emergence of the Republicans after the collapse of the Whigs -- and that was over 140 years ago, on the verge of a civil war.

Recognizing this reality, the organized core constituencies the Greens wish to speak for -- labor, minorities, feminists, environmentalists, gays and lesbians -- remain within the Democratic Party, the only viable political force with the power to defend their interests. And the stakes are all too real: minimum wage increases, occupational health and safety enforcement, appointments to the National Labor Relations Board and the federal courts up through the Supreme Court, affirmative action, abortion rights, domestic partner rights and benefits, environmental protection, equitable tax policy, gun control, protecting Social Security and expanding Medicare.

For these reasons -- not political cowardice -- Al Gore, not Nader, has been endorsed by the AFL-CIO, most civil rights and feminist leaders, the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, and the League of Conservation Voters. The stakes are particularly high in the expanding list of battleground states where Gore could lose to George W. Bush.

Progressives thus face the election with two contrasting images of the Nader campaign. Is Nader a white knight, leading a crusade that eventually will find the keys to a Green Jerusalem?

Or is he a political Pied Piper, leading youth down an initially appealing path but then vanishing under a mountain of sectarian strife and conservative victories, ending up disillusioned and burned out, never to be heard from again?

Those unconcerned about Bush winning see Nader as the white knight, while those who fear a Republican triumph imagine the Pied Piper.