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An alternative Democratic platform

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The draft Democratic Platform advertises itself as a "moderate, achievable, common-sense agenda that will improve people's daily lives and not increase the size of government." It's certainly moderate enough, and it certainly won't increase the "big government" in Washington, which has already shrunk to its smallest size in 30 years. But it will do very little to improve people's daily lives--and what it doesn't do virtually assures that many lives will be further coarsened and disrupted by an economy untutored by democratic will.

"Opportunity, Responsibility, Community"--worthy, old-fashioned, focus group-approved words--are the document's alleged organizing themes. The platform offers them for the now familiar Clinton triangulation between failed policies and utter depravity. Neoliberalism with a smirking face. Deregulation and costless cultural signaling. Trade deals for the big boys at Commerce. Food out of the mouths of those babes with parents stupid enough to be poor. "Opportunity" is mostly about education, without the resources to make it possible. "Responsibility" is mostly about crime--which we're all against--and defense, which we all want adequately supplied. "Community" is mostly about putting V-chips in TVs and taking cigarettes out of the mouths of the young. Cities are not mentioned. Women get choice and ... well, what more could they possibly want? And on the topic of corporate violence and greed, get this precise and thundering condemnation: "Employers have a responsibility to do their part as well. ... We believe that values like loyalty, fairness and responsibility are not inconsistent with the bottom line."

Same old same old. But they'll win in November, and we'll be glad they did, given the alternative.

At some point, though--and now is as good a time as any--we ought to start thinking about our alternative, about what a truly progressive program for American reconstruction might be. Assume for a moment the improbable, that we had a competent vehicle to put the message out--a vastly larger New Party, a truly reformed Democratic Party or some other lowering beast still waiting to be born--what do we have to say? Properly suspicious of discussions that go nowhere, yet improperly inattentive to the need to have something to say if we're ever going to go anywhere, progressives don't answer this question enough.

Maybe that's because there are no answers--something that an increasing number of progressives, in their hearts, seem to believe. To hear all the talk of the internationalization of capital, for example, you might think there is really nothing to be done short of forming a world government, which we can't do because we can't even organize a national one. Or to hear all the talk of racial and other differences, and the decline of working-class solidarity, you might think there could never be enough of us willing to do something together even if there was something to be done.

Or maybe progressives are hesitant to address the question because there are too many answers--too many things are screwed up, with too much interdependency in their solution--so that the impulse to start the "what is to be done" list is snuffed out by its having no clear end. Or, in a variant on this, progressives might be constrained by the idea that to act

together on anything, we have to agree on everything.

None of these excuses is particularly compelling. It's true that our world is not the world of our parents. The basic structure of the economy and politics has changed in ways that defeat traditional New Deal/Great Society politics. But that doesn't mean there is nothing to be done, or that the best that we can hope for is triage in the rollback of social democracy's achievements. While organized social movements with progressive goals are few and far between these days, that doesn't mean there's not a mass public for a new progressive politics. Indeed, there's probably a bigger public for such a politics now than at any time since the 1930s.

After all, a generation of economic decline and failed government response has not only made American politics ugly, it's also generated a huge potential base for the signature issues of progressives--greater social control of the economy and a democracy strong enough to enforce it. There is vast implicit demand for imposing some standards on corporate behavior, for making values matter in how we run our economy and distribute opportunity and reward. And there is vast demand for a more responsive and effective "government"--competent public and social authorities accountable to popular aims. Satisfying these demands could be the basis for a new mass democratic politics--a politics that would get progressives out of their marginal ghetto and into the business of running the country. It's not the case--it never has been--that we need to agree on everything before doing some good on some things.

Of course, a new progressive politics would need to take into account how the world has changed. We should recognize that the nation state can no longer be the only instrument of politics--the self-governing capacity of society itself would need to be increased. While the achievements of the welfare state were considerable, we need to be far less defensive about its defects. And while the politics of expression and charity are all well and good, we have to say something about how to "improve people's daily lives" and offer some "common sense" solutions to real and urgent problems.

But that still leaves plenty to be said, and we need not be timid. In These Times asked me and 10 other progressives to write sections in their area of expertise for an alternative Democratic platform. That platform, laid out below, could plausibly find majority support in the general population. It's not something likely to be offered anytime soon by either of the major parties, but something we might do well to refine, improve, and publicize together.

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