

HOME

By Daniel Sturm

At a spring forum on environmental issues in Brighton, the Green Party candidate Douglas Campbell tried to present his agenda. He wanted to say that he favored building a 100-megawatt, municipally owned wind farm to avert a California-style power crisis and protecting the Great Lakes from oil drilling by promoting alternative power sources. And rather than giving General Motors \$188.7 million in tax exemptions to build a new factory, he hoped to call for supporting hybrid vehicles.

Joe Peil/City Pulse

Lansing resident Raymond Ziarno is the Green Candidate for Michigan's Secretary of State. If elected he would make Election Day a holiday, introduce internet voting, and permit same-day registration.

But the Green politician, who tips the scale at over 250 pounds, had no chance to get his message out. He'd just taken a seat when Brighton police and Michigan state troopers hauled him out by his arms and legs. The Michigan League of Conservation Voters, which hosted the event, said only primary election candidates were invited. Campbell was handcuffed. Six police officers "threw me down to the floor, and three of them piled on top of me to make sure I didn't go anywhere." One rib was definitely broken, while the X-rays were ambiguous on a few others, he says. The Green candidate, who wants to make lemonade out of lemons, says that should he become Michigan's next governor, "I'll be looking at police brutality."

In all likelihood the former automaker who designed a solar powered car will not be elected the next governor of Michigan. But Campbell showed during his appearance at last weekend's Green Party Convention in Lansing that it's becoming a little easier to be Green. Less than two years after presidential candidate Ralph Nader

collected nearly 3 million votes (more than 10 times the margin separating the two main candidates), Green Party activists in a dozen states are launching aggressive campaigns for state and local office.

As voters throughout the western world become disillusioned with politics and political parties, new social movements are emerging as key actors in the promotion of change. The rise of the Michigan Greens in 1997 reflects this trend. A major milestone was the 2000 petition drive to place Ralph Nader on the state's ballot. In addition to successfully collecting over 52,000 signatures, at the last presidential election several hundred Michigan members were recruited to the party.

The Green Party's agenda calls for universal health care; fair trade including minimum pay and environmental safeguards; narrowing the gap between rich and poor by eliminating tax breaks for corporations paying below living wages, opposing "fast track" trade agreements and democratizing World Trade Organization tribunals, and a moratorium on the death penalty and the expensive missile defense system.

In the last federal elections, the Greens ran nearly 300 local and state candidates, nearly a third of whom were elected. In California, five towns including Santa Monica, now have Green mayors. According to exit polls, the Green campaign brought more than 1 million new voters to the polls.

One expected to see a crowd of longhaired radicals, left over from the days when hippies and peaceniks prepared for the Age of Aquarius, but the professionalism of the Party's annual state convention last Saturday at the Days Inn on South Cedar Street didn't match the stereotype. The 32 candidates nominated for the Nov. 5 general election also undermined this stereotype. Let's take Campbell, for instance. Having worked with both Chrysler and Ford makes him a provocative choice for governor in a state dominated by the Big Three automakers and their auxiliary industries.

The Green candidate for the conservative Michigan Supreme Court, Donnelly Hadden, has been a successful environmental attorney "for fun and profit" since the 1960s. "We sue air polluters, water polluters, we sue people who put sewage in your basements, we sue landfills, we sue people who leave leaking underground storage tanks behind when they close their gas stations." Hadden has won some notable cases, including Oakwood Homeowners Association v. Ford (1977), Oakwood Homeowners v. Marathon Oil Co. (1981), and Her Majesty the Queen v. City of Detroit (1989).

Green Party candidate Doug Campbell gets removed from the gubernatorial forum by Brighton police officers after he refused to leave. The forum was open to candidates properly registered for the primary with the secretary of state. "One rib was definitely broken while the X-rays were ambiguous on a few others," he says. The Green candidate says should he become Michigan's next governor, he'll be looking at police brutality.

With the right campaign, there's a good chance "to slip a Green into office," he argues. After all, the candidate's name will appear on the ballot as non-partisan. "It's going to be a bitter, dirty, mud-slinging battle" said Hadden, who intends to build a network of colleagues who will either promote the Green Party in public or be a source of financial support. He points out that not many attorneys are fighting the big polluters, since most environmental lawyers are "on the other side."

Lansing resident Ray Ziarno, who is running for secretary of state, is perhaps the Party's least typical candidate. After serving as an officer in the U.S. Air Force, he's worked for GM, Sears, the Census Bureau, the Postal Service and as an engineering consultant and political volunteer. Along with John Austin (Democratic Party), Ziarno is an expert in electoral reforms endorsed by the Michigan Election Reform Coalition, whose co-coordinator, Lynn Hartung, says, "They both support full public funding of elections, aggressive campaign finance reform efforts and meaningful election reform that will enfranchise more voters."

Ziarno said in an interview that in the last few decades 80 countries have become democratic, but none have adopted the American electoral system. Both Bill Clinton and Richard Nixon, he argues, won elections with less than 45 percent of the vote. Ziarno believes the system of Instant Runoff Voting – IRV — practiced in city council and school district elections nationwide, should be introduced to guarantee majority rule in the United States. Alaska is holding a statewide referendum on IRV this fall.

IRV means voters rank candidates in order of choice, indicating favorite candidates as well as runoff choices. If the voter's first choice is eliminated, his or her vote counts for a second choice candidate. Under this system, most of Ralph Nader voters' second choices would have gone to Gore, who would have won the 2000 presidential election, Ziarno claims. If elected Michigan's secretary of state, Ziarno would make Election Day a holiday, introduce internet voting, and permit same-day registration.

Terry Link, Director of the Office of Campus Sustainability at

Michigan State University, believes that if the Greens can make a significant electoral breakthrough, “progressive politics will be born.” Unlike most European countries, however, the United States is overwhelmingly a two-party system. “The deck is stacked against third parties. Hopefully the stamina of the Green Party is sufficient to eventually change the face of politics, in two ways: by forcing the other parties to move toward the Green Party’s core values, and by getting people elected to local positions.”

Link is co-coordinator of the colloquy, “What in the World is Going On?”, hosted last session at the Brookshire Golf and Country Club in Williamston. The colloquy focuses on issues such as 9/11, ENRON, the Middle East conflict, climate change, AIDS and the growing gap between rich and poor. Link says Green parties worldwide intend an ambitious “systems approach” encompassing social and economic justice, ecological integrity, nonviolence, peace, and democracy.

Although these aims may seem a million miles from political reality, in many European countries third parties have achieved the breakthrough into the political mainstream precisely by promotion values such as peace and environmental and social justice. As a direct consequence of the Greens’ success, Germany has developed the strictest environmental protection legislation in the world. Could these Michigan Greens really be at the start of something new? Starting a third political party in a traditionally bi-partisan system won’t be easy.

How were the German Greens even able to enter the federal government in 1998? The political scientist Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh concludes in the 1997 book “Social Movements in Politics”: “The Green party movement appeared ... during a recession in the world capitalist economy. It was also a time when the West German party system was stagnant; major parties were imitating one another rather than offering telling criticisms of the current order and imaginative proposals for substantive change.”

The parallel with the United States is obvious — the lack of clear blue water between the two main parties on most major issues mirrors German politics in the ‘80s, when no party was advocating social transformation or opposing the dominance of big business. The difference is perhaps that the West German constitution made conditions for the formation of a new party more favorable than they are in the United States. West Germany’s federal political system and its modified system of proportional representation offered favorable chances for a social movement wishing to launch an electoral campaign.

After crossing the 5 percent threshold in five state elections, the

Greens captured 5.6 percent of the vote in the 1983 federal election and became the first party in three decades to break into parliament. As a major victory, in 2000 an elected coalition of Social Democrats and Greens passed a bill to decommission nuclear power plants that are more than 32 years old without reimbursing the power companies.

I noted at the conference this weekend that Michigan's Green Party appeals more to professionals than did the German, Austrian and Netherlands campaigns that had begun two decades before. And who were the candidates, after all? A lawyer, a retired U.S. Air Force officer, a former automobile engineer. The eloquent consumer lawyer Jerry Kaufman, running for attorney general, was trained by Ralph Nader himself. Hair was short at the meeting and shirt tails were tucked in.

"You may be surprised to hear that I used to be a nuclear engineer," Campbell said in an interview. He did component testing for several nuclear power plants, including one on Three Mile Island. Unlike other gubernatorial candidates, Campbell calls for a complete shutdown of nuclear power and weapons. He claims nuclear power is much more expensive than other forms of electricity. "In 1988 the variable costs of nuclear power started to exceed that of coal."

Jim Detjen

Nuclear accidents at Chernobyl and TMI had a major influence on the growth of Green parties across Europe. In a three-part series, Philadelphia Inquirer reporters Jim Detjen and Susan Fitzgerald discovered that hundreds of workers had been contaminated by radioactive particles on TMI. Today Detjen, who is director of MSU's Knight Center of Environmental Journalism and has been nominated eight times for the Pulitzer Prize, recalls how safety rules were quickly improved following the article. No new commercial nuclear power plants have been built in the United States since TMI.

Detjen believes the rise of the Greens in the United States may be a step-by-step process. He expects the party to grow, especially in university communities, but also in more liberal areas like Oregon, Maine, Vermont and Washington. He sees a high likelihood that Green issues will be co-opted by Democratic and Republican parties. Of course, this makes the Green Party's election challenge all the more difficult. All the candidates for Michigan governor this year emphasized the importance of environmental protection, including clean air and water supply and the importance of recycling.

"It indicates that the campaign strategists understand that the voters want environmental protection. But when it comes down to it –

in all likelihood they will end up having to choose between corporate sponsors who pay the bills and the environment,” says Campbell. As an example of bi-partisan lip service he mentions last year’s congressional vote to improve the CAFE (corporate average fuel economy) standard on fuel efficiency levels for automobile engines. “Fifteen out of 16 of our representatives in Congress, including Michigan gubernatorial candidate David Bonior, voted against it. What kind of environmentalism is this?”

Ken Mathenia

There were a few UAW members at the meeting on Saturday. Ken Mathenia is an electrician at Delphi car factory who joined the Greens as a volunteer in 1998. “We see our jobs being outsourced,” adding that maintaining the CAFE standard “hasn’t brought us any new jobs.” Mathenia said many of his co-workers agree with him and share his anger. “Candidates are puppets for the corporations who pay for their campaigns.” He calls for publicly financed campaigns and can’t understand the lack of enthusiasm for a third party. “Abraham Lincoln was from a third party, the Republicans. They have changed a great deal since his days, though.”

Might the Greens be an effective force for progressive change? David Dempsey, policy adviser for the Michigan Environmental Council (and a City Pulse columnist), said he thinks so. He said that every environmental ballot proposal put before voters in Michigan since 1968 has passed with an overwhelming majority. “Environmental issues can be put at the core of a political party, along with related issues of clean economic growth and humane treatment of our fellow citizens through universal health care, and civil rights initiatives,” he said.

But Dempsey, who is the author of “Ruin and Recovery: Michigan’s Rise as a Conservation Leader,” also perceives problems for the Michigan Greens. “They have not yet recruited a critical mass – even a small critical mass – of respected environmentalists, let alone leaders from other communities to hammer out a vision and begin reaching out to a network of citizens.”

Paul Emery

An official membership total is hard to calculate because the party structure is decentralized, but it has an estimated 500 members in Michigan. Paul Emery, office manager of the Capital Area Greens, has roughly 150 members on his contact list and says that while chapters in Detroit, Ann Arbor, Traverse City and Grand Rapids are considered to be strong, the Lansing chapter is relatively weak. “The progressive elements of Lansing are already so close to the Legislature,” explains Emery.

The 59-year-old activist calls himself a heretic because he left the Democrats, for whom he used to campaign. During the Vietnam War, he worked for Democratic peace candidate Eugene McCarthy and was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention for Jesse Jackson. “The straw that broke the camel’s back was last year, when Al Gore totally prostituted himself for the Miami vote in regard of the Elian Gonzales issue,” said Emery. He started to dislike the Democrats when they not only accepted zero tolerance policies initiated by Republicans but also decided “to be even more draconian than Republicans in their war against drugs.”

What are the social conditions that would make a new political movement successful? In his study of the rise of the German Greens, Cyrus Zirakzadeh emphasizes the importance of political frustration and intensity of activism. “As theorists might expect, many Greens had previously been active in social groups and institutions, such as peace marches, religious organizations, and college study groups. There they developed many of the goals and strategies that they would later pursue as movement activists.”

Zirakzadeh points out that government threats to civil liberties and high unemployment among recent college graduates motivated Germans to vote for the Greens. It’s easy to see parallels in the United States today, in the growing surveillance of the USA Patriot Act, the economic downturn and the increasing costs of education. The Michigan Greens base their hope for political impact in this frustration with current politics. They consider themselves to still be a small force, but as the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead, quoted in their campaign material, once said: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

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