Who's Afraid of the L-Word?
'Progressivism' in the New Democrat Era

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Introduction

The 'progressive' label made a comeback in American politics in the final decade of the twentieth century under the aegis of the so-called New Democrat project. It became the hallmark of the third-way public philosophy that the Democratic Leadership Council aimed to make the Democratic Party new orthodoxy.[1] The DLC adopted the 'progressive' nomenclature to distinguish its formula for activist government not only from liberalism's association with big government but also conservatism's anti-government ethos. This marked a conscious effort to repudiate the dominant ideologies of American politics through rediscovery of the values of an earlier generation of reformers who faced the challenge of national renewal. In its *New Progressive Declaration* of July 10, 1996, the DLC proclaimed, "America needs a third choice that replaces the left's reflexive defense of the bureaucratic status quo and counters the right's destructive bid to simply dismantle government…. The challenges of today resemble those of a century ago. And the response we offer mirrors–in new circumstances–the Progressive movement that reshaped our politics and renewed our country."[2]

My aim in this paper is to explore three questions pertaining to the final manifestation of progressivism in the twentieth century. First, how was New Democrat progressivism different from 'old' Democrat liberalism? Second, were there substantive as opposed to merely rhetorical parallels between late and early twentieth century progressivism? And third, is there any evidence that 1990s progressivism established a viable legacy for successful Democratic politics?

New Democrat Progressivism and Old Democrat Liberalism

The New Democrat project was into its third phase when it took on the progressive label. Its first organizational embodiment, the House Democratic Caucus Committee on Party Effectiveness (CPE), was created in 1981 to develop an agenda for party unity in the one institution of national government under Democratic control in the early Reagan era. Intentionally building a membership across political and regional divides, this eschewed divisive social-policy issues pertaining to race and gender to focus on economic policy. Although its key policy statements made little impact on the broader party, they can be seen as the genesis of the later New Democrat concern to enhance economic growth and individual opportunity through promotion of public and private investment.[3]

The creation of the Democratic Leadership Council in early 1985 initiated the second phase of New Democrat development. This was largely established at the instigation of Southern moderates anxious to head off a Republican realignment in their region in reaction to the perceived liberalism of Walter Mondale's presidential campaign, but the requirements of party unity forestalled agenda development in favor of institutional reform. The DLC initially focused on changing party rules, particularly through support for a Super Tuesday Southern regional primary, in the hope of promoting the presidential candidacy of a centrist Democrat in 1988.[4]

The turning point of the New Democrat project into an agency of broad party renewal was the 1988 presidential election. Far from producing the kind of Southern nominee that the DLC favored, the regional primary ultimately benefited Jesse Jackson, who had famously castigated what he called “Democrats for the Leisure Class” as out of touch with the party’s lower-income, bi-racial base. Michael Dukakis’s eventual capture of the nomination brought little joy because his efforts to define the presidential election in terms of candidate competence rather than ideology foundered in the face of George Bush’s success in making liberalism the dirty word of American politics.

As DLC executive-director Al From later commented, “Dukakis erased the liberal graffiti on the wall but put nothing on it, and Bush painted it for him. Dukakis never articulated an alternative vision for the country, allowing Bush to use wedge issues against him. At that point we decided to increase the intellectual effort within the DLC.”[5] Consequently the DLC adopted a more adversarial stance to national party liberalism, established the Progressive Policy Institute as a think tank to develop a New Democratic philosophy and embarked on an aggressive strategy to promote a presidential candidate of its ilk. In essence, it sought “to take over the party by battling for its head.”[6]

The DLC repudiation of liberalism received its starkest expression in a PPI position paper, *The Politics of Evasion*, authored by political scientists William Galston and Elaine Kamarck in 1989. This condemned “liberal fundamentalism” as associated in the public’s mind since the late 1960s “with tax and spend policies that contradict the interests of average families; with welfare policies that foster dependence rather than self-reliance; with softness towards the perpetrators of crime and indifference towards its victims; with ambivalence toward the assertion of American values and interests abroad; and with an adversarial stance towards mainstream moral and cultural values.”[7]

Having defined the liberal state that it rejected, the DLC moved on to promulgate its ideal of progressive government in the *New Orleans Declaration* of March 1990. This envisaged a dual role for the state in the promotion of a "democratic capitalism." Government had a duty to lay the foundations for private enterprise to expand economic growth through expanding international trade, restructuring the tax code to encourage business investment, and promoting technology and infrastructure improvements through public investment. Equally, it had an obligation to equip workers to maximize their wealth creation through provision of better education and training and to promote welfare reform that encouraged welfare recipient to renter the labor market. As PPI fellow David Osborne had previously observed of the emerging New Democrat paradigm, "To boil it down to a slogan, if the [liberal] thesis was government as solution and the [conservative] antithesis was government as problem, the [progressive] synthesis is government as partner."[8]

In essence, the New Democrat message championed individual opportunity, personal responsibility, community solidarity and government that empowered in contrast to liberalism's identification with the redistributive agenda of rights, entitlements and compensatory government. In this way it hoped to bridge the divide between economics and culture that its supporters considered the fatal legacy of post-1960s liberalism.[9] According to Al From, the DLC-promoted public philosophy embodied three basic principles: "First, that growth, not redistribution, is the key to increased opportunity, and that the private sector, not government, is the primary engine for economic growth; second, that the values most Americans share–liberty of conscience, individual responsibility, work, faith, family and community–should be embodied in the policies of our government; and third, that there is a role for activist government that equips people to solve problems, but not big government that does it for them."[10] The same thinking underlay Bill Clinton's less than successful initial effort in a series of speeches at Georgetown University in late 1991 to badge the theme of his forthcoming presidential campaign as a New Covenant of mutual responsibility between government and citizen.[11]

Perhaps nothing better encapsulated this vision than the New Democrat proposal for a Citizen Corps, originally proposed on the DLC's behalf by Northwestern University sociologist Charles Moskos in 1988 and eventually enacted as AmeriCorps in Bill Clinton's National Service Act of 1993. As initially conceived this envisaged widening participation in higher education by providing participating students with a voucher worth $10,000 for each year of voluntary service–whether in schools, communities, or government bodies–that could be redeemed for tuition, training or housing costs. It provided citizens with benefits not as their right but in return for work they would perform for the betterment of society. According to Moskos, national service "moves us beyond the sort of something-for-nothing, every-man for himself, me-first philosophy" that liberalism had encouraged since the late 1960s.[12]

Parallels between 'new' and 'old' Progressivism

In appropriating the progressive label for the kind of activist government they favored, New Democrats were doing more than employing a convenient term from the political lexicon. In their construct, liberalism necessarily lacked contemporary relevance because it had been created in response to economic crisis in the 1930s and expanded in response to racial crisis in the 1960s. In contrast, they lauded old and new progressivism as visionary efforts to address parallel socioeconomic change at the dawn and end of America's twentieth century.

According to the likes of PPI director Will Marshall, the two Progressivisms were all about meeting the challenges of national transition. The early variant had to manage America's transformation from an agricultural economy to an industrial one, from an isolated nation to a global power, and from an ethnically homogeneous society to a heterogeneous one. The later progressives had to deal with its next transition from an industrial to an information economy, from a Cold War military superpower to a geo-financial hegemon in a globalized world economy, and from a predominantly white society to one undergoing demographic transformation under the impact of immigration from the third world.[13]

Identification with Progressivism also enabled the New Democrats to locate their political discourse within the nation's story before liberalism went off the rails. In this regard it was their version of Ronald Reagan's "back to the future" narrative. As historian Otis Graham, who had made his scholarly reputation through study of the old progressives and the New Deal, approvingly commented, "Returning to the word *Progressive* may have more significance than is realized. It suggests a recognition that recent misjudgments are not the whole of the political heritage, and reminds that, a century ago, the nonsocialist left built a winning story around nation-building, along with the conviction that capitalism, alone, should not be given the only role in planning, or steering, a country."[14]

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the original Progressives in the eyes of their putative heirs was their nation-building success in the face of centrifugal forces of change. In this context, New Democrat assumption of the progressive label carried deliberate connotations of restoring national solidarity that liberalism was deemed to have weakened through its group-oriented obsession with redressing the class, racial and gender legacies of the past. In the DLC's analysis, the wrong turn taken by liberalism from the second half of the 1960s onward had reduced the Democratic party by century's end to something like its late-nineteenth century self – a minority party harbor for ethnic tribes with no compelling ideas or national business to transact. Central to its project of party renewal, therefore, was the replication of early twentieth century Progressivism's success in developing a reform agenda that strengthened national identity and purpose.[15]

The critique of liberal particularism was by no means confined to the DLC, of course. As veteran New Left activist Todd Gitlin observed, "Today it is the conservatives who claim common culture and color blindness as their causes. [When Ronald Reagan spoke of national revitalization] the Democrats offered no commonality … no political culture – only a heap of demands piled on demands."[16] Sharing this concern, New Democrats saw themselves as the heirs of a political tradition running from the New Freedom through to the New Frontier and that received its most perfect rhetorical expression as recently as John F. Kennedy's inaugural address exhortation about the obligations of citizens to their nation.[17]

Like their forbears, the 1990s progressives also railed against the power of monopoly in American society, but in their case the threat emanated from government rather than the trusts. With some exceptions, notably when the Clinton administration took on big tobacco in an unsuccessful effort to overhaul industry practices, New Democrats were remarkably unconcerned about concentration of economic power. This reflected their conviction that the atomistic economy idealized by Wilson and Brandeis was coming to pass because small firms benefiting from the application of new information technology were the primary drivers of the 1990s boom.

New Democrats were also confident that the electronic revolution would eventually make big government and its interlocking web of self-interested bureaucracies and special interests obsolete. Typifying this belief, Bill Clinton in his 1991 address as DLC chair, declared, “In the information age, monopoly decisions handed down on high by government bureaucracies are not always the way to go.” The future president looked forward to the reinvention of government whereby the role of federal bureaucracy was less to manage programs than to provide information for citizens to make choices about services that were locally based to ensure greater accountability.[18]

Paradoxically, New Democrats regarded Clinton’s signature reform as president, his unsuccessful promotion of health care insurance, as a betrayal of their progressive principles because of its excessive bureaucratization and centralization. Historian and PPI fellow Fred Siegel and PPI chair Will Marshall regarded the defeat of this initiative as marking the “end of a half-century effort to create a full-blown American version of the European welfare state.” They urged progressives now to seek inspiration from the New Freedom with its “emphasis on citizens rather than clients, markets rather than managers.”[19] As with much else in the New Democrat historical narrative, this was a questionable interpretation of the past. At the very least, it bespoke ignorance of arguments advanced in separate works published earlier the same year (1995) by Christopher Lasch and Robert Wiebe that a “national class” of self-appointed experts emerged from the progressive reform movement and thereafter the political participation of ordinary Americans in government was steadily reduced.[20]

Undeterred by the complexity of history, Marshall reiterated this message as the main author of the DLC’s *New Progressive Declaration* of 1996, arguably its most anti-statist expression of public philosophy to date. This proclaimed that the New Deal's "presumption for democratic action must be reversed. Citizens and local institutions, rather than distant government agencies, should be the problem solvers of first recourse." The instrument of this new reality would be the Information Revolution made possible by the new technology that facilitated development of "decentralized, self-managed or self-organizing organizations which are much more given coherence by vision and common values rather than any command or control structure."[21] A number of DLC-friendly commentators such as John Judis lauded this as a reaffirmation of old Progressive faith in states and localities as the laboratories of democracy.[22]

The viability of the 'new' progressive legacy

While short-term assessments must necessarily be speculative, the evidence for a viable new progressive legacy is not persuasive. Late twentieth progressivism had a much narrower footprint than its early twentieth century forbear that reached across both parties and embraced a myriad of causes promoted by a wide array of interest groups. Despite some bipartisan linkage through the New Paradigm Society, founded in 1990 by PPI fellow Elaine Kamarck and Bush administration domestic aide James Pinkerton, the new progressivism was fundamentally a partisan effort to renew the Democratic party rather than a broad political movement motivated by civic ideals.[23]

Judged as a formula for building an electoral majority, the New Democrat project was a failure. Though only the third Democratic president of the twentieth century to win two terms, Bill Clinton was a minority president whose average share of the popular vote in 1992 and 1996 was less than that taken by the defeated Democratic candidates in 2000 and 2004. Moreover, the Democrats endured from

1995 through 2006 their longest period as the minority party in Congress since 1919-1930.

For New Democrat enthusiasts, the problem lay not with the message but the messenger. Bill Clinton’s first two years in office disappointed them for lack of progressive consistency. According to the DLC, the new president diluted his third-way credentials by pursuing health care reform as his grand initiative in 1994 instead of welfare reform that made a more coherent New Democratic supplement to his deficit reduction program of 1993. Although Clinton sought to regain the center ground after the Republicans took control of Congress, his triangulation strategy to this end was hardly a pure invocation of the DLC agenda. The president’s line in the sand against the Contract with America was the defense of Medicare against retrenchment and partial privatization and of Medicaid against retrenchment and devolution to the states, Republican goals that had some affinity with DLC proposals for these programs embodied in the New Progressive Declaration. Nor was Clinton in a position to promote New Democratic initiatives on a broad front in his scandal-hit second term. Significantly, the big idea of his final two years in office was to put the social security program, the New Deal’s most enduring legacy, on a sound actuarial basis by placing its trust fund surplus in a lock-box that could not be raided to fund Republican tax-cuts.

Seeking to reconnect with New Democrats at the DLC’s 1998 convention, Clinton declared, “The real test of our ideas is whether they outlive this presidency.” Even on this score the progressive legacy of the 1990s appears limited owing to the subsequent collapse of the DLC constituency within the Democratic party. In 1999, a Pew survey found that self-identified liberals and New Democrats each accounted for about a quarter of the Democratic base. By 2005, however, liberals had nearly doubled their share, while the New Democrats had dwindled into near irrelevancy. Many moderate-leaning Democratic identifiers had now moved leftwards in protest at George W. Bush's Iraq war policy, his upward redistribution of wealth through tax cuts for the rich, his attempted reform of social security and his trenchant association with the Christian right. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that none of the serious contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination attended in 2007 the DLC's national convention that sixteen years earlier had been the launch pad for Bill Clinton's White House candidacy.[24]

In 1998, New Democrat intellectuals William Galston and Elaine Kamarck produced a bullish ours-is-the-future essay entitled "Five Realities That Will Shape 21st Century Politics." First among these, they argued, was that increasing returns from education had propelled many Americans into a "new learning class" of wealthier, upwardly mobile and self-reliant citizens. In their view this accounted for the decreasing size of the conventional middle class and the increasing gap between rich and poor, two developments that liberals blamed on the shameful maldistribution of wealth in the boom of the 1990s. To Galston and Kamarck, however, the public policy solution to the income gap was to provide more citizens with higher quality education. It was a mistake, they warned, to believe that Democratic majorities could be constructed "from a swelling pool of poor and near-poor Americans waiting to be mobilized by an old-fashioned politics of redistribution."[25]

This analysis looks wholly irrelevant to the insecurities of the contemporary electorate that is buffeted by financial crisis, recession, rising energy prices, collapsing house prices, and a growing rate of home repossessions. Whether the Democratic standard bearer–be it Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton–finds a winning message to capture the White House remains to be seen. If he or she does, however, this is likely to have more in common with the liberalism engendered by the New Deal than the progressive alternative promoted by the New Democrats.

Notes

1. For analysis of the New Democrats, see: John Hale, "The Making of the New Democrats," *Political Science Quarterly,* 110, No. 2 (1995), 207-32; and Kenneth Baer, *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton* (Lawrence: UP Kansas, 2000).

2. Democratic Leadership Council, "The New Progressive Declaration: A Political Philosophy for the Information Age," July 10, 1996.

3. See, in particular: Committee on Party Effectiveness, *Rebuilding the Road to Opportunity: A Democratic Direction for the 1980s* (Washington DC: GPO, 1982); and National-House Democratic Caucus, *Renewing America's Promise: A Democratic Blueprint for Our Nation's Future* (Washington DC: N-HDC, 1984).

4. Dan Balz, "Southern and Western Democrats Launch New Leadership Council; Party Faction Challenges Power of DNC Chief," *WP*, March 1, 1985, A2; Harold W. Stanley and Charles D. Hadley, "The Southern Presidential Primary: Regional Intentions with National Implications," *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 17, No 3 (1987), 83-100.

5. Quoted in Hale, "The Making of the New Democrats," 219.

6. Baer, *Reinventing Democrats*, 8.

7. William Galston and Elaine Kamarck, "The Politics of Evasion: Democrats and the Presidency," (Washington DC: PPI, 1989).

8. DLC, “New Orleans Declaration: A Democratic Agenda for the 1990s” (Washington DC: DLC, March 1990); David Osborne, *Laboratories of Democracy* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1988), 327.

9. For this, see in particular the essay by PPI fellow Fred Siegel, “What Liberals Haven’t Learned and Why,” *Commonweal* (January 1989), 17-18.

10. Al From, “Democrats in the Center” quoted in James MacGregor Burns and Georgia Sorenson, *Dead Center: Clinton-Gore Leadership and the Perils of Moderation* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 154

11. Bill Clinton, “The New Covenant: Responsibility and Rebuilding the American Community,” October 23, 1991; “A New Covenant for Economic Change,” November 20, 1991; “A New Covenant for American Ssecurity,” December 12, 1991.

12. “DLC Launches ‘National Service ’88,’ *DLC Newsgram* 2, No 3 (November 1988), 1; Steven Waldman, *The Bill: How Legislation Really Becomes Law: A Case Study of the National Service Bill*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1996) [quotation p. 4].

13. Will Marshall, “A New Fighting Faith,” *New Democrat* 8 (September/October, 1996), 17. See too, Marshall to PPI Trustees, “Re. Progressive Principles,” September 5, 1990, quoted in Baer, *Reinventing Democrats*, 166.

14. Otis Graham, “Liberalism after the Sixties: A Reconnaissance,” in William H. Chafe, ed., *The Achievement of American Liberalism: The New Deal and Its Legacies* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), 317.

15. Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 33, 79. See too: John Judis and Michael Lind, “For a New Nationalism,” *New Republic* (march 27, 1995), 19-27, and

David Hollinger, "National Solidarity at the End of the Twentieth Century," *Journal of American History* (September 1997), 559-69.

16. See, for example, Fred Siegel and Will Marshall, "Liberalism's Lost Tradition," *New Democrat* (September/October 1995), 8-12.

17. See, in particular, Galston and Kamarck, "The Politics of Evasion," and Marshall, "A New Fighting Faith."

18. "Keynote address of Governor Bill Clinton to the DLC's Cleveland Convention," May 6, 1991.

19. Siegel and Marshall, "Liberalism's Lost Tradition," 8, 11.

20. Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: Norton, 1995), and Robert Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

21. Marshall, *New Progressive Declaration*, 17; "Time to Move On," *New Democrat* 7 (September/October 1995), 2.

22. John Judis, "Beyond the Clinton Presidency," *New Republic*, September 16 and 23, 1996, 24-25.

23. Morton Kondracke, "Neo-politics: The Left-Right Smooch-in," *New Republic*, November 25, 1991, 18; Mickey Kaus, "Paradigm's Loss: Jim Pinkerton and Bill Clinton," *ibid.*, July 27, 1992, 16.

24. Bill Clinton, "Remarks by the President at the Democratic Leadership Council Dinner," December 2, 1998; Noam Scheiber, "The Centrists Didn't Hold," *NYT*, July 28, 2007.

25. William Galston and Elaine Kamarck, "Five Realities That Will Shape 21st Century Politics," *Blueprint: Ideas for a New Century* 1 (Fall 1998), 10. For a contrary perspective on the need for liberal activism to address economic insecurities,

see Burns and Sorensen, *Dead Center*, and Ruy Texeira and Joel Rogers, *America's Forgotten Majority: Why the white Working Class still Matters* (New York: Basic books, 2000).