

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#348 - Ralph Nader's Democracy Toolbox -- Part 1

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For several years, Ralph Nader has been advocating a series of changes intended to strengthen our democracy. February 1, 1992, Nader presented "The Concord Principles: An Agenda for a New Initiatory Democracy." This week and next, we offer you the Concord Principles, with commentary.

WHEREAS, a selfish oligarchy has produced economic decline, the debasement of politics, and the exclusion of citizens from the strengthening of their democracy and political economy;

WHEREAS, this rule of the self-serving few over the nation's business and politics has concentrated power, money, greed, and corruption far beyond the control or accountability of citizens;

WHEREAS, the political system, regardless of party, has degenerated into a government of the power brokers, by the power brokers, and for the power brokers that is an arrogant and distant caricature of Jeffersonian democracy;

WHEREAS, Presidential campaigns have become narrow, shallow, redundant, and frantic parades and horse races which candidates, their monetary backers, and their handlers control unilaterally, with the citizenry expected to be the bystanders and compliant voters;

WHEREAS, a pervading sense of powerlessness, denial, and revulsion is sweeping the nation's citizens as they endure or suffer from growing inequities, injustice, and loss of control over their future and the future of their children; and

WHEREAS, we, the citizens of the United States, who are dedicated to the reassertion of fundamental democratic principles and their application to the practical, daily events in our nation, are committed to beginning the work of shaping the substance of Presidential campaigns and of engaging the candidates' attention to our citizen agenda during this 1992 election year;

NOW, THEREFORE, WE HEREBY present the ensuing Concord Principles:

FIRST, democracy is more than a bundle of rights on paper; democracy must also embrace usable facilities that empower all citizens

(a) to obtain timely, accurate information from their government;

(b) to communicate such information and their judgments to one another through modern technology; and:

(c) to band together in civic associations as voters, taxpayers, consumers, workers, shareholders, students and as whole human beings in pursuit of a prosperous, just and free society.

SECOND, the separation of OWNERSHIP of major societal assets from their CONTROL permits the concentration of power over such assets in the hands of the few who control rather than in the hands of the many who own. The owners of the public lands, pension funds, savings accounts, and the public airwaves are the American people, who have essentially little or no control over their pooled assets or their commonwealth.

The American people should assume reasonable control over the assets they have legally owned for many years so that their use reflects citizen priorities for a prosperous America, mindful of the needs and rights of present and future generations of Americans to pursue happiness within benign environments.

THIRD, a growing and grave imbalance between the often converging power of Big Business, Big Government and the citizens of this country has seriously damaged our democracy and weakened our ability to correct this imbalance. We lack the mechanisms of civic power. We need a modern toolbox for redeeming our democracy by strengthening our capacity for

self-government and self-reliance both as individuals and as a community of citizens. Our 18th century democratic rights need retooling for the proper exercise of our responsibilities as citizens in the 21st century.

FOURTH, the new democracy toolbox contains measures for protecting voters from having their voting powers diluted, over-run or nullified. These measures are:

(a) a binding none-of-the-above opinion on the ballot. [If "none of the above" received the largest number of votes, this would trigger a new election.]

(b) term limitations, 12 years and out;

(c) public financing of campaigns through well-promoted voluntary taxpayer checkoffs on tax returns;

(d) easier voter registration and ballot access rules; [Congress has since passed the so-called "motor voter" law to make voter registration simpler and easier, but the bill has not yet come out of conference committee, so the exact provisions remain unknown.]

(e) state-level binding initiative, referendum, and recall authority, and a non-binding national referendum procedure. ["Initiative" gives citizens the right to propose legislation for consideration by the voters, not waiting for a legislator to propose it; "referendum" allows citizens to vote laws into effect themselves, circumventing legislatures; "recall" allows citizens to un-elect particular elected officials.] And:

(f) a repeal of the runaway White House/Congressional pay raises back to 1988 levels.

FIFTH, the new democracy toolbox strengthens taxpayers who wish to have a say in how their tax dollars are being used and how their taxpayer assets are being protected. These objectives will be advanced by according taxpayers full legal standing to challenge the waste, fraud and abuse of tax monies and taxpayer assets. Presently, the federal judiciary places nearly insurmountable obstacles in front of taxpayers, thereby leaving the task to the unlikely prospect of government officials taking their own government to court.

Further, a facility for taxpayers banding together can be established by a simple taxpayer checkoff on the 1040 tax return, inviting taxpayers to join their national taxpayers association which would be accountable to members on a one-member one-vote standard.

Finally, obscure, overly complex, mystifying jargon pervading federal tax, pension, election and other laws and procedures is a barrier to taxpayer-citizen participation. The language of these laws and procedures must be simplified and clarified as a matter of national priority; otherwise, only special interests hiring decoders will be able to participate while the general public is shut out.

SIXTH, the new democracy toolbox strengthens consumers of both business and government services by according them:

(a) computerized access in libraries and their own homes to a full range of government information for which they have already paid but are now unable to obtain, either inexpensively or at all;

(b) facilities in the form of periodic inserts, included in the billing or other envelopes sent to them by companies that are either legal monopolies (for example, electric, gas, telephone bills) or are subsidized or subsidizable by the taxpayers (for example, banks and savings and loans). These inserts invite consumers to join their own state-wide consumer action groups to act as a watchdog, to negotiate and to advocate for their interests.

A model of this facility is the Illinois Citizen Utility Board which

has saved ratepayers over \$3 billion since 1983 and filled the consumer chair before utility commissions, legislative hearings, and courtroom proceedings on many occasions.

This type of facility costs taxpayers nothing, costs the carrying companies or government mailings nothing (the consumer group pays for the insert and there is no extra postage) and is voluntary for consumers to join. Had there been such bank consumer associations with full-time staff in the 1970s, there would not have been a trillion dollar bailout on the taxpayers' back for the S&L and commercial bank crimes, speculations, and mismanagement debacle. These would have been dipped in the bud at the community level by informed, organized consumer judgment. So too would have costly and hazardous energy projects been replaced by energy efficiency and renewable power systems; and

(c) Citizen consumers are the viewers and listeners of television and radio. Federal law says that the public owns the public airwaves which are now leased for free by the Federal Communications Commission to television and radio companies. The public, whose only option is to switch dials or turn off, deserves its own Audience Network.

The Audience Network would enhance the communication and mobilization process between people locally and nationally. The owners of the airwaves deserve a return of their property for one hour prime time and drive time on all licensed stations so that their professional studios, producers, and reporters can program what the audience believes is important to them and their children. The proposal for Audience Network, funded by dues from the audience-members and other NON-tax revenues, was the subject of a Congressional hearing in 1991, chaired by Congressman Edward Markey.

Similarly, in return for cable company monopoly and other powers, cable subscribers should be able to join their own cable viewers group through a periodic insert in their monthly cable billing envelopes. Modern electronic communications can play a critical role in anticipating and resolving costly national problems when their owners gain regular usage, as a community intelligence, to inform, alert, and mobilize democratic citizen initiatives. Presently, these electronic broadcasting systems are overwhelmingly used for entertainment, advertising and redundant news, certainly not a fair reflection of what a serious society needs to communicate in a complex age, locally, nationally, and globally.

(d) Access to justice --to the courts, to government agencies, and to legislatures --is available to organized, special interests, and they widely use these remedies. In contrast, when consumers are defrauded, injured, rendered sick by wrongdoers or other perpetrators of their harm, they find costly dollar and legal hurdles blocking their right of access. They also find indentured politicians and their lobbying allies bent on closing the doors further. Systems of justice are to be used conveniently and efficiently by all the people in this country, not just corporations and the wealthy. Otherwise, the citizen shutout worsens. [Continued next week.]

--Peter Montague

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