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What's Wrong With The Democrats?

*A former
candidate
undresses the
state party.*

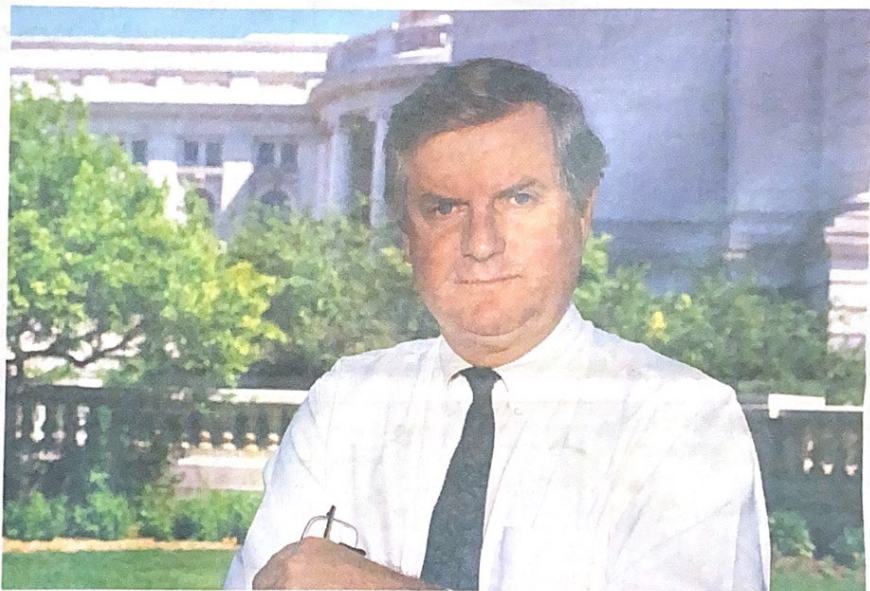
BY ED GARVEY

In April of this year, Bill Berger of Columbia County—an officer of the Farmer's Union and a progressive Democrat—announced that he would take on neoconservative incumbent Rep. Robert Thompson in a primary race. If elected, Bill Berger would be the only farmer-Democrat in the legislature.

Berger played a key role in the fight for a moratorium on bovine growth hormone, or BGH. He organized farmers for Mondale, Dukakis, my own campaigns for U.S. Senate, and ultimately for Kohl. He believes in progressive taxation and a woman's right to abortion. He was the type of Democrat that Democrats everywhere should be glad to support.

But Berger soon learned that Thompson's fellow legislative Democrats—even those who regarded Thompson as an embarrassment to the party—could be counted on to offer whispers of encouragement, nothing more. So brazen was Berger's offense in challenging an incumbent that not one Democratic legislator so much as attended his announcement of candidacy in the Capitol.

A few weeks later, Rep. Thompson announced his plans to switch parties and run for secretary of state on the same ticket as his old friend Gov. Tommy Thompson. That got the



Garvey: 'The Democratic Party has simply ceased to be relevant on issues that move the masses.'

DON KERKHOF

**Wisconsin's
Democratic Party
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pollsters and the GOP
to set the agenda
and define the terms
of the debate.**

fireworks going. Bill Christofferson, campaign manager for Tom Loftus, declared that Bob Thompson is an "anti-choice gun nut."

Really? One day earlier Loftus, the party's standard-bearer and candidate for governor, was supporting this "nut" for reelection—even above the candidacy of a newcomer who paid some allegiance to the progressive tradition the Democratic Party claims it upholds.

This episode says much about what

the Democratic Party of Wisconsin is these days—or rather, what it isn't. And what it isn't most of all is a place where issues and ideas matter.

BLURRED DISTINCTIONS

A recent poll found that 62% of Democratic voters nationally had no response to the question, "What issues do you think the Democrats in Congress are handling best?"

Continued on Page 8

Where's the Beef?

*Lots of salt and fat
found in new
Oscar Mayer
product.*

BY MARC EISEN

Sometimes you can't tell what lurks inside the blister-packs lining the shelves of your favorite grocery store. Take Oscar Mayer's "Lunchables." It's one of the most successful new convenience foods, and it's a dietary nightmare, according to a nutrition advocacy group.

"It would be tough to invent a food worse than Oscar Mayer's Lunchables: eight half-sandwiches of heavily processed meats and cheeses on cholesterol-raising crackers," reports the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Excess salt and grease are the problems. The center, in its Nutrition Action Newsletter, objects that the 7½ teaspoons of fat in the Bologna with American Cheese Lunchable exceeds the fat content of a Big Mac. As for the Ham & Beef with Cheddar & Swiss variety, you'd have to eat 15 strips of bacon to equal its 1,800 mg. of sodium, the center grouches.

Nutritional complaints aside, the center didn't think much of the product's flavor, either: "To our

hungry mouths, the meat tasted like pieces of salt-cured cardboard that had been glued together, and the cheese had the consistency of Play-Doh."

Over at Oscar Mayer, the trashing of Lunchables is being taken with, let's say, a grain of salt. "It's a highly successful line, and it's right for the way people eat today," says Shelagh Thomee, consumer information manager for the Madison-based food processor.

Kids carry Lunchables in their lunchboxes, businesspeople put them in their briefcases, she points out.

"More than anything else, this product is sheer fun," Thomee says. "One of the things consumers tell us



is they like all the combinations they can make out of the cheese, meat and crackers. It's a sort of do-your-own-thing kind of food."

But what about its nutritional worth? Are Lunchables as unhealthy as the center says? "It depends on what you mean by healthy," Thomee replies. "Health food is the nuts-and-twigs variety.... This is a fun food. Whether it's healthy depends on what else you're eating. It's all a question of balance."

Chew on that for a while. And if you want to learn more nutrition facts, turn to page 13 for Todd Openheimer's health report. ■

DEMOCRATS

Continued from Page 1

If a similar poll were conducted in Wisconsin about Democrats in the state legislature under the leadership of Assembly Speaker Loftus and Senate Majority Leader Joe Strohl, I suspect the results would be even more dramatic. In fact, I doubt that even 10% of the people of Wisconsin could name a single issue that the majority party in the legislature is handling better than the GOP.

Why? Incumbent Democrats at the state and national level have moved to the right of center, blurring the distinction between the two parties. This keeps money sources happy, and helps them get reelected. In 1990, the party's candidate for governor avoids strong positions on all but one issue: support for abortion, a clear vote-getter throughout the nation.

My own involvement with the

Democratic Party began when I was a college student, and it began with ideas: the Point Four Youth Corps of Henry Reuss, Hubert Humphrey's civil rights bill, opposition to the House Committee on Un-American Activities, federal aid to education. Issues first, personalities second.

Today it would be almost impossible to convince a college student to become a Democrat based on ideas. The advice I got from Democratic Party people when I ran for the U.S. Senate in 1986 and 1988 was to avoid specific issues—keep it general. In recent years, this strategy has been taken to an extreme.

The Democratic Party has simply ceased to be relevant on issues that move the masses: the environment, minimum wage and the rights of working people, civil rights, women's rights (other than abortion), education, poverty, homelessness, the regulation of migrant-worker camps, helping families of the disabled, preschool

education, ethics in government...you get the point. Indeed, the party no longer has an ethic of its own other than the protection of incumbents; no agenda other than to elect candidates.

Such talk will offend many good people who attend the meetings, hand out the literature, vote a straight ticket because they believe that the party is somehow carrying out their own personal philosophy of government—or at least that it is better than the alternative. The latter statement is true enough: The Democratic Party is better than the alternative party, which allows for no progressive ideas.

Still, the state's Democratic Party has, under Loftus and his followers, allowed that alternative party—and others—to set the agenda and define the terms of the debate.

IRRELEVANT EXERCISES

"Nonsense," the party officials will respond. "Have you read the platform

we put together last weekend in Oshkosh? Have you listened to the hours of debate at the 2nd Congressional District caucus?"

It's true that the 2nd Congressional District caucus representing Madison and Dane County has held vigorous debates, and that many of the issues mentioned above are addressed in the party's platform. The question is whether either of these exercises makes any difference.

Has any member of Wisconsin's congressional delegation or the legislature ever read the platform? I doubt it. I never did—even when I was the Democratic Party's nominee for U.S. Senate in 1986.

The agenda for the Democratic majority in the legislature is decidedly not set at the state Democratic convention. In fact, most Democratic legislators and members of the state's congressional delegation don't even bother to attend the event. And when these incumbents do show up, it's to party hardy—not to explain their conduct, present their vision of the future or participate in the debate.

In 1984, incumbent Democratic Gov. Tony Earl was leading the charge for utilities who wanted a change in the law allowing them to form holding companies. The idea drew fire from party progressives, the state attorney general's office and such groups as the Citizens' Utility Board and the AFL-CIO.

At the Democratic convention that year in Appleton, a resolution was introduced by Allied Industrial Workers stating absolute opposition to the holding company bill. I seconded and spoke in favor of the resolution, which, as I recall, passed unanimously.

A short time later I ran into a member of Earl's staff, Dan Wisniewski, who seemed annoyed that we had placed a tack on Tony's chair but was unmoved by the significance of the new plank. Earl and his staff proceeded to push through the bill with the help of 14 lobbyists paid for by the utilities. So much for accountability.

And what did the legislators who run for office under the label "Democrat" do? Many explained that they had to "go with the governor." One state senator was more blunt: "You shouldn't be so hard on the utilities—they put a lot of money in my campaign."

SQUELCHING DISSENT

Who sets the agenda for the Democratic Party in the legislature? Lobbyists, plain and simple. Who will determine the issues to be debated in the governor's race? Pollsters, media advisers and campaign managers—in the case of Tom Loftus, the same campaign managers who advised Herb Kohl on his issueless campaign.

Is the party relevant? Yes, it's very relevant. This party that has no central philosophy beyond sloppy generalizations and incredibly detailed positions on issues no incumbent does anything about, is extremely relevant because it recruits, finances and elects lawmakers under its banner.

The Wisconsin Democratic Party is a branch of the incumbent legislators and members of Congress. Their control is absolute, and those outside the loop are as insignificant as the party's opposition to holding companies.

If there were an independent Democratic Party, someone might get the bright idea to establish standards for those who run under the Democratic label, and raise money for challengers of Democrats who support big-business interests against the people. But that would never happen in Wisconsin's Democratic Party today.

Incumbent legislators control the party. Not the issues part—that stuff can be ignored—but the important part: staff and money.

Not too long ago, a state Democratic Party chairman named Matt Flynn had the temerity to criticize incumbent Democrats and to comment on public-policy issues. That got the attention of the Earl administration, which decided to appoint one of its own as chairman to squelch further dissent. To emphasize that loyalists are rewarded, the administration tapped Suellen Albrecht, the appointments secretary working just below the governor's office in the Capitol.

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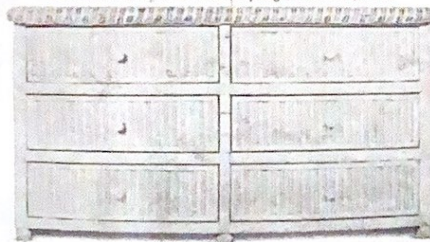
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Albrecht used her position to reward the faithful—faithful to Tony and the Knights of the Round Dome, that is—and punish the unfaithful. She rarely spoke on issues and never criticized an incumbent. After state Democrats, under Albrecht's reign, witnessed a series of agonizing defeats—Reagan over Mondale, Thompson over Earl, Kasten over myself—there was talk that she would step aside.

I considered running for the post, believing I could bring some new ideas and attract new people to the party. Flares went up all over the place. Legislative Democrats, with help from Jim Moody and Les Aspin, joined forces to convince old soldier Albrecht to seek reelection. When I asked Loftus to explain, he said a mouthful: "Suelien understands the needs of the legislature. We didn't want someone in that position that would have a different agenda."

When Albrecht finished her second term and moved out of state, there was fear once again that a progressive party outsider would seek the job—once again the potential "different agenda." This time the legislators moved to get former colleague and future office-seeker Jeff Neubauer to run. But Neubauer was concerned about possible competition from the progressive camp. He came to my house to plead for support.

When Neubauer asked me what progressives in the party wanted, I said that we wanted to help select the next executive director of the party—someone who would be open to all constituent groups. "You have a deal," said Neubauer, and we shook hands. Neubauer ran unopposed and almost immediately appointed Herb Kohl's home secretary, Jonathan Sender, as executive director.

The decision was made by white, primarily male insiders without any consultation with party "outsiders." Shut out of the process were the constituent groups that make up the Democratic Party—women, African-Americans, seniors, Hispanics, labor,

students, farmers. But the party was left with a leader who would "understand" the needs and perspectives of incumbent legislators. You can bet Sender will support every single incumbent, whether or not that incumbent is a closet Republican.

MAINTAINING CONTROL

The Democratic Party, like its Republican counterpart, also keeps a tight grip on who runs for office through its control of money—most of which comes ultimately from special interests.

For almost all legislative candidates, winning an election means getting their

What is needed are candidates who will run on issues and programs, not slogans and TV spots. We need to generate a real debate.

party's support. In fact, most successful candidates for state Assembly or Senate have been groomed—if not hand-picked—by the Assembly Democratic Caucus or the Senate Democratic Caucus. It's no accident that most members of the legislature are former legislative aides. Where better to look for new talent than right under the Dome?

The caucuses train these people, ask them to run, help finance their campaigns, give them access to the polling data and electronic recording equipment for radio ads, and then send staff into the field to get them elected. Thus, when they are elected, they owe a lot to party leaders like Loftus and Strohl—and you can be sure that these debts are eventually collected.

The legislature consists primarily of white males whose political philosophy ranges from conservative to middle-of-the-road. They control the money flow, they search and select new candidates for safe seats, decide who should run for higher office. Is it any wonder that all our Congressmen are white males, and, with the exception of Bob Kastenmeier, middle-of-the-road to conservative? Is it any wonder that two white, middle-of-the-road males (Loftus and state Sen. Joe Czarnecki) will head the ticket for governor?

Tom Loftus thinks he is going to be elected because he has the enthusiastic support of tens of legislators who call themselves Democrats. The Incumbent Democratic Party of Wisconsin will elect him. He thinks that labor has no other place to turn so they must vote for him; that women will appreciate his pro-choice views; that he is better on the environment than Thompson; that African-Americans won't blame him for not showing how the state's budget surplus could be put to good use in the inner cities.

He is wrong. Unless Loftus steps up to the plate with a bold program that excites those constituencies, he might as well stay in Sun Prairie preparing for Corn Fest. This is no time for caution. The state needs leaders willing to take risks, willing to speak out on problems. Give us California's Big Green agenda. Do something!

LIKE WHAT?

Tom Loftus has a rare opportunity. At the very least, it is an opportunity, after eight cautious years as speaker of the Assembly, to set the agenda for the Democrats in the '90s.

This is Loftus' moment on the stage. If he is bold enough, he might be able to elevate the level of political discourse on any number of important issues. If he is bold enough, he might even win.

Loftus must grasp his opportunity to take decisive stands—not hide, as some would like him to, behind meaningless 30-second spots. He should raise a hue

and cry over the weak and ineffective laws governing labor relations; vow to work for national health care; propose new scholarships for education; demand a return to a progressive income tax rather than the growing reliance on regressive sales and property taxes; pledge to slash the staggering 21% unemployment rate among Milwaukee's blacks.

The Democratic candidate should promise complete public financing of all elections within four years so that women, blacks, Hispanics, young people and poor people have a shot at seeking public office. He should insist that party incumbents reflect the makeup of the state—i.e., more women and people of color. He should assert that the party expects accountability from incumbents.

Is there hope for the Democratic Party? I believe there is, but it comes from listening to the people and not the consultants.

There is a growing consensus in this country that private money must be removed from campaigns. The public is growing impatient with Kohl-like campaigns that turn on money and TV spots. African-Americans are getting tired of being taken for granted, women want to hold office as well as help run campaigns; young people are talking about economic justice.

Labor, which has emerged from a decade-long slumber with victories at Pittston, United Airlines and Eastern, is now demanding support from incumbents on the strike-breaking bill rather than simply endorsing any Democrat who asks for help. Farmers saw what they could accomplish when they mobilize around an issue (BGH) rather than around a candidate.


What is needed are candidates who will run on issues and programs, not slogans and TV spots. We need to generate a real debate.

If the Democratic Party does this, will it win more elections? Perhaps. But the more sobering thought is that if the party stays its present course, it may not deserve to. ■

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