Ronnie Dugger (founding editor of the TEXAS OBSERVER) recently summarized our situation eloquently:[1]

"We are ruled by Big Business and Big Government as its paid hireling, and we know it. Corporate money is wrecking popular government in the United States. The big corporations and the centimillionaires and billionaires have taken daily control of our work, our pay, our housing, our health, our pension funds, our bank and savings deposits, our public lands, our airwaves, our elections, and our very government. It's as if American democracy has been bought and paid for. How will we recover ourselves and overcome the bombers? Or will they continue to divide us and will we continue to divide ourselves according to our wounds and our alarms, until they have taken the country away from us for good?"

"...The Northern Europeans who were our country's founders exterminated or confined millions of Native Americans whose ancestors had been living here for 30,000 years. African-Americans were enslaved until the Civil War; women were not allowed to vote for 131 years, until 1920. But after the abolitionist, women's suffrage, farmers', union, progressive, civil rights, environmentalist, feminist, and gay and lesbian liberation movements, and much more immigration, the question now is whether we can found the first genuinely international democracy. If we cannot, the corporations have us...

"...It's no coincidence that within the same historical moment we have lost both our self-governance and the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party, on which many millions of ordinary people have relied to represent them since the 1930s, has been hollowed out and rebuilt from the inside by corporate money. What was once the party of the common man is now the second party of the corporate mannequin. In national politics ordinary people no longer exist. We simply aren't there. No wonder only 75 million of us eligible to vote in 1994 did so, while 108 million more of us, also eligible, did not...."

Dugger goes on: "What is government about?... Ernesto Cortes, Jr., the exceptionally important organizer who helps people in communities in the Southwest to act together in their own interests, once exclaimed: 'Power! Power comes in two forms: organized people and organized money.' To govern ourselves, power is what we need. To get it we must want it and organize for it.

"This is a call to hope and to action, a call to reclaim and reinvent democracy, a call to the hard work of reorganizing ourselves into a broad national coalition, a call to populists, workers, progressives, and liberals to reconstitute ourselves into a smashing new national force to end corporate rule."

Dugger goes on to urge that everyone should come to St. Louis in November to create this new coalition. We think this is a good idea—only because it's too soon. The ground hasn't been properly plowed for such a meeting to bear sustainable fruit. Dugger himself reportedly does not want to build the new coalition; without some minimal infrastructure, seed money, and committed organizers, such a meeting seems likely to waste resources, frustrate people, and not accomplish its goal.[2] But the impulse is right—ordinary Americans have had their democracy taken from them, right before their eyes, chiefly by corporations and by government officials (of both parties) who are financed and owned by corporations. We desperately need to get organized. Ernesto Cortes is on target: to govern ourselves once again, power is what we need, and, since we don't have money, organized people is the only way to get power.

Stepping back, the question before us is: how best to plow the ground for seeding a new progressive national coalition? In our opinion, the deepest thinking on this question has been done by Joel Rogers at University of Wisconsin and by Joshua Cohen at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In dozens of articles during the past 5 years, Rogers alone, or Rogers and Cohen together, with help from many activists, have analyzed the conditions in the U.S. that have led us to our present decline (see REHW #458 and #459). And they have suggested how we might climb out of the deep hole we find ourselves in.[3]

As Rogers and Cohen see it, we need large organizing projects that (a) can bring already-in motion progressives into coherent alignment for further movement TOGETHER; (b) can draw into the movement many sympathetic people who are presently standing on the sidelines; and (c) can provide real material benefits for movement adherents AND for the larger society. Rogers has outlined 3 such organizing projects, emphasizing that they are not the only ones possible: (1) the New Party (which we described briefly in REHW #445), which is now perking along in 12 states; (2) Sustainable America—a project to rebuild democracy and political strength by rebuilding cities and inner-ring suburbs (the heart of the high-wage, low-wage option); and (3) a Democracy Campaign, developed with Ralph Nader.

According to recent polls, an astonishing 75 percent of Americans think government is "run by a few interests that don't care about me." Given such broad awareness of the breakdown of representative government, why not put democracy itself on the table?

Rogers writes: Imagine a Democracy Campaign—initially targeted to states, eventually providing the basis for federal reform—aiming to equip all citizens with the rights, remedies, and organizational resources they need to practice democracy in late-twentieth-century circumstances. An immediate focus for the Campaign might be reform of our corrupt system of campaign finance and voter and party rights to allow free and fair exercise of formal self-governing powers. [See REHW #426, #427 and #433.] But the new infrastructure would need also to support us in other important social roles—as workers, consumers, taxpayers, and shareholders in social and private wealth—allowing the effective exercise of power on which we know any working democracy depends.

How might the Campaign's reforms be framed? Perhaps as a new bill of rights for each of the roles mentioned above, with the explicit background expectation throughout that the state encourage the exercise of the rights elaborated. Thus:

** The right of voters to participate freely and equally in an electoral system where candidacy is not determined by money; party competition is open and fair; and referendum, recall, and initiative are fully available... to be enhanced by universal or same-day voter registration; an election-day holiday; voting systems accurately weighing minority electoral sentiment; a revival of the fusion option in party politics;[4] lowered barriers to third party qualification and maintenance requirements; universal referendum, recall, and initiative rights; and, of course, democratically-financed elections. (As a practical matter, until we get democratic funding of elections, no progressive electoral politics can flourish beyond the local level.)

** The right of workers to form associations in the workplace free from interference by employers... to be extended by simple "check-off" certification; severe penalties for employers who interfere with organizing; explicit supports for good employer practices; and protection of the rights of "minority union" members. In all likelihood, the organization thus-enabled would take a variety of forms, extending beyond today's "exclusive bargaining representative" model. What is important within this variety is that the organizations be truly "worker-owned"--independent of employer domination—and that unions in this sense grow wildly again.

** The right of consumers of goods and services to monitor, bargain over, and lobby for the regulation of their quality and sale... to be implemented, for example, by an extension of the Nader-inspired Consumer Utilities Board model to agencies like the U.S. Post Office, Social Security and Veterans administrations, public...
housing authorities, insurance companies and banks, and other government agencies and private producers.

** The right of taxpayers to shape the priorities of the public purse and the management of public assets... to be established through such things as set-asides of public revenues from private use of public lands to fund citizen watchdogs on such use; the requirement that data collected by the government be made available, for free and in accessible form, to citizens; vastly increased taxpayer standing rights in administrative and judicial proceedings bearing on the disposition of public assets or monies; and a restoration of public regulation of the airwaves. The right of shareholders to effective control of their assets... to be asserted against the prevailing separation of ownership and control, which is responsible for much failure of corporate accountability --most urgently in the case of private pensions, whose $3 trillion in assets lie beyond the control of their worker-owners. Reforming current pension law to permit greater control and direction by those who want it would be a natural place to start, and a fine way to drive the bankers crazy.

If Americans had these rights and supports, what might result? The honest answer is that nobody knows for sure, since they have never had most of them in the past. But it seems likely that the results would include a much livelier and more engaged civic culture; almost infinitely higher rates of voter participation; a significant reduction in corporate and government fraud, abuse, and waste; a more disciplined and programmatic approach to problems affecting the public welfare; a stronger and more effective party system for the processing of citizen demand into effective governance; and better, less bureaucratic enforcement of statutory commands.

And the appeal to progressives of all kinds is obvious. We who believe in democracy are most advantaged by the capacity to exercise it. Whether our wish is to form unions, organize communities, create new producer co-ops, launch feminist solidarity councils, green the use of federal lands, limit corporate abuses, hold politicians accountable to promises, mobilize our own scattered resources in economic reconstruction, get our views expressed in the media, or do almost anything else that's worthwhile, some increase in our capacity to organize would obviously be welcome. Given an opportunity to change the rules, we should grab it.

[Next week: Sustainable America.]

--Peter Montague


[2] Communicate YOUR ideas directly to Ronnie Dugger via E-mail: Rdugger[12]3@aol.com, or write him c/o THE NATION, 72 Fifth Ave., NYC, NY 10011; enclose SASE.


[4] Fusion denotes the ability of more than one party to nominate the same (consenting) candidate for the same office in the same election. Such "fusion" of parties on candidates was widely practiced in the U.S. in the 19th century, when it helped underwrite all the major third party efforts of the day. Today, it is widely banned. Fusion helps third parties by permitting their members to cast a protest vote that's not wasted; where they don't have power to run and win on their own, they can vote for the more attractive alternative offered by the two major parties, but on their own ballot line, with the votes cast on the minor party counted in the candidate's total.

Descriptor terms: strategies; environmental movement; vision; mass movements; social change; civic culture; solidarity; ideology; ralph nader; democracy; new party; sustainable america; democracy project; political parties; fusion; referendum; recall; labor; consumer rights; taxpayer rights;