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The McKinney Choice
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Mention to someone that you're thinking about voting for former Georgia Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney or Ralph Nader and they'll respond, "So, you're voting for McCain!" Or they'll say, "You're wasting your vote." And if you're black and not planning on voting for Obama, you may be labeled a "hater" or an "Uncle Tom." I know. I've been called those names. Poet Amiri Baraka, never one to be shy, has labeled all those not supporting Obama as "rascals."

It doesn't matter that McKinney is herself African American or that Rosa Clemente, her running mate on the Green Party ticket, is a hip-hop activist and an Afro-Puerto Rican. What matters, for most, is that Obama represents the first realistic chance for a black American to win the White House, and that he is better than McCain.

But should those be the overriding considerations?

While Obama is cosmetically attractive, he is still a status quo politician. What's more, he has gone out of his way to disparage members of the African American community as a way to ingratiate himself with white voters. And he sometimes defends the same rightwing positions as his Republican counterpart, as when Obama supported Bush on the FISA bill and agreed with Scalia on the D.C. gun ban.

Aside from Obama's limitations, there's the question of movement politics. If we believe that the two party system rigs the electoral game, if we believe that corporate money contaminates both parties, and if we believe change comes from below, then why must we get in line behind Obama?

With these thoughts in mind, I went out to explore the McKinney candidacy. McKinney, who served as a Democrat in the U.S. House of Representatives for twelve years, left the Democratic Party last year to join the Greens. In Congress, she had one of the most progressive records. And as a Presidential candidate, she offers up a coherent agenda.

In her acceptance speech at the Green Party convention in Chicago on July 12, she denounced what she called "Democratic Party complicity" in "war crimes, torture, crimes against the peace" and "crimes against the Constitution, crimes against the American people, and crimes against the global community." She said, "Those who delivered us into this mess cannot be trusted to get us out of it." She told her supporters, "A Green vote is a peace vote," and "A Green vote is a justice vote."

Whether the subject was the Iraq War, or Afghanistan, or Katrina, or veterans' rights, or Blackwater, or civil liberties, or the environment, or universal health care, or equal pay for equal work, or free college education, or the repeal of the Bush tax cuts, McKinney hit the progressive high notes. (But she was a little off key when she indulged the "9/11 truth" people.)

"We are in this to build a movement," she said. "We are willing to struggle for as long as it takes to have our values prevail in public policy. A vote for the Green Party is a vote for the movement that will turn this country right side up."

McKinney's platform resembles that of Dennis Kucinich, the Ohio Representative who ran as the most progressive candidate in the Democratic primaries. Like Kucinich, McKinney wants an immediate end to all wars and occupations by U.S. forces, beginning in Iraq and Afghanistan; the orderly withdrawal of U.S. troops from the more than 100 countries around the world where they are stationed; Articles of Impeachment to be filed against Bush and several members of his Administration; and the creation of a Department of Peace. She would also like to see a number of other Bush initiatives repealed, like the Patriot Acts, the Secret Evidence Act, and the Military Commissions Act.

Like Obama, McKinney name-drops Martin Luther King a lot. But whereas Obama constantly utters King's line about "the fierce urgency of now," McKinney uses King in a different way. She says "the racial disparities that exist today are worse than at the time of the murder of King." And she quotes King's comment that the United States is the "greatest purveyor of violence on the planet," saying that it is still true today.

McKinney also adopts positions that Obama won't go near, such as: demanding reparations for African Americans, offering amnesty for all undocumented immigrants, ending "prisons for profit," and calling off the "war on drugs."

But having a shiny progressive platform does not guarantee progressive votes. I recall a rule of organizing in the 1988 Jesse Jackson campaign: "Define your own win." Reason being: If it's about who has the most money, resources, access, etc., those going against the flow or those who are resource poor will always be sold short. Especially when the powerful set the rules and call the game.

Running was Shirley Chisholm's win in 1972.

Jackson's win was successfully advancing a progressive, multiracial, multi-issue agenda.

So what's McKinney's win?

She says the Greens want to pick up "5 percent of the national vote" in the coming election with the hope it "confers major party status" on them.

"Then we will have an official third party in this country," McKinney said in Chicago, "and public policy that truly reflects our values."

Yet 5 percent may be a tough nut to crack, given the party's up and down performances in the past three Presidential elections.

As a Green candidate in 1996, Nader garnered 0.7 percent of the total. Four years later, he and the party increased their support three-fold, pulling in 2.74 percent of the total vote while receiving no electoral votes. In 2004, the Greens ran Texan David Cobb under a "safe states strategy." Cobb appeared on twenty-eight of fifty-one ballots, down from the forty-four Green lines in 2000. The strategy supposedly focused its efforts on states that were traditionally "safely" won by the Democratic candidate, or "safely" won by the Republican candidate, so as not to run in swing states. This defensiveness was in reaction to the Nader-haters of 2000, who still blame Ralph for giving the country George Bush. Cobb got an infinitesimal 0.096 percent of the vote, while Nader as an Independent picked up 0.38 percent of the total.

This election season the Greens have abandoned the discredited "safe state strategy," says Brent McMillan, political director of the party. Mc-Kinney and Clemente are on the ballot in thirty states, according to the Green Party.

The party's national electoral history may prevent McKinney from being taken seriously by even the angriest of voters. "It seems that there's no in-between game," says longtime grassroots activist Brett Bursey of South Carolina. "The Greens pop up during an election season and that's it." He and others argue that the election-year "top-down approach" of choosing big-name candidates like Nader and McKinney rarely lends itself to the off-year followup that is needed to build an effective national party. "It will take more time than running doomed electoral campaigns that do little more than make the candidates and their few supporters feel superior," says Bursey.

Bursey may have a point. The Greens have a dearth of campaign offices (local folk where I live in South Carolina don't know how to get involved), and there are precious few grassroots volunteers outside of traditional Green "strongholds." Obviously, money matters, and McKinney and the Greens have very little.

And the Obama candidacy is tricky for the Greens. "There are some Greens who won't support a Green at the top of our ticket today, regardless of who that person is," says Gregg Jocoy, of the South Carolina chapter. "White Greens don't want to hurt Obama's chances."

Given these difficulties, the question once again arises: "Why bother?" To which Clemente replies, "People have to make some clear choices about which side are they on." The goal, she says, is "building the new imperative."

One can only hope that because McKinney and Clemente are raising important issues they're not wasting their and others' time.

But let me put a word in for being contrary, for refusing to go with flow, and for rejecting the choices we are given when we have that opportunity. Sometimes it is necessary to stand up and say, "I'm not with that." Defying the corrupt two-party corporate system may be one of those times.

The choice is yours. And mine. And for me, it's not an easy one.

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The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog

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