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We Need A New Progressive Program, And We Need It Now!

Progressives, put aside your justifiable detestation of Donald Trump and his Musky minions for one second, and answer this question:

Q: What's the most important difference between MAGA Republicans and Democrats?

A: MAGA Republicans have a program for change.

Yes, it's a terrible program: a toxic mix of pro-oligarchy economic policy, tribal-nationalist politics, patriarchal social values, and hatred of the public sector. But MAGA policies are based on a relatively coherent ideology that identifies what right-wingers consider the main sources of oppression – the administrative state, left-leaning universities and news media, undocumented immigrants, street criminals, and foreign competitors – and that promises to eliminate or transform them.

MAGA leaders believe that the American system is broken and that they know how to rebuild it. Therefore, once in power, they implement immediate measures to change existing institutions. True, these initiatives tend to be poorly thought through, arbitrary, and inhumane, and they generate legal challenges to the authority of the President and other executive officials. But social movements with a program for change frequently strain or violate existing norms. Furthermore, their advocates tend to take strong action, while defenders of the established status quo seem content just to talk.

Talk about role reversals! By acting as change-agents, the MAGA-pols have maneuvered the Democrats into the position of acting as backward-looking defenders of the Establishment. The anti-Trumpers mean well, but all their handwringing about the President's authoritarianism, venality, and cruelty will not change the fact that his forces have a program for change, and they do not.

Most Democratic politicians do not think that the system is broken, only that it needs minor repairs. As a result, the policies and public actions they envision for the future differ hardly

at all from those of a Joe Biden or a Bill Clinton. Most of them embrace a mishmash of liberal (but not *too* liberal) attitudes regarding domestic political issues and militaristic flag-waving (which they call “American global leadership”) in foreign affairs. Raise the minimum wage they say – but not too high, and don’t even think about altering the established system of private financial power and “management rights.” Tax the rich, but not too severely, and never talk about redistributing wealth to poor and near-poor working people. Support clean energy and environmental protection – but protect the fossil fuel industries! Work for international peace – but don’t antagonize the military-industrial complex!

This sort of vacuous, passive thinking, not just the benighted views of the MAGA base, were responsible for the disastrous decline in Democratic votes in the last election and, therefore, for the Trump victory. On the other side, MAGA leaders working through right-wing think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and correctly assessing the high degree of civic discontent developed radical policies purporting to solve working people’s problems. That these policies made no sense was politically irrelevant. In 2024, there was no leftist alternative to the rightists and their Project 2025. When there is no Left, and when the existing system fails to satisfy people’s basic needs, discontented voters predictably turn Right.

The Urgent Need for New Discussions and Organization

What would a genuinely progressive program look like? I have a few ideas about this – and I’m sure you do, too – but we desperately need discussions starting immediately and continuing through the year to surface key ideas, assess their effectiveness and practicality, and convert them into workable policy proposals. Think tanks can sponsor some of these exchanges, but people of all ages and backgrounds can meet in churches and clubs, high schools and universities, town halls, popular bars, and other public forums to let their views be known.

One goal crucial to these deliberations is the need to unite key sectors of the population that Trump and MAGA-ism have divided: in particular, workers in high tech and public service industries and those in older industries and occupations. Note that the need for unity does NOT require that we become more “moderate.” On the contrary, it means developing problem-solving solutions radical enough to make problems based on unnecessary scarcities and manipulated insecurities disappear, and to change key elements of a dysfunctional market-driven system.

Here are a few of the specific issues that I would raise at a public discussion. But make up your own list – the more, the merrier!

Problem: The Oligarchy. Solution: Redistribute wealth and power. Like drunks after a bad night before, pretty much all the Dems now declare themselves allies of the People against the Bad Oligarchs. But raising the minimum wage and taxing the rich a bit more will not change the system that has produced fifty years of wage stagnation, deep urban poverty, rural decay, and gross inequality.

Why not consider a 100% income tax on incomes over \$1 million, and a wealth tax designed to lessen our exploding social disparities? Why not talk about nationalizing Big Pharma and the high-tech giants that depend on government grants and research to survive? Oligarchical capitalism inevitably produces authoritarian politics designed to serve the billionaires' interests by crippling the labor movement and privatizing social services. Why not reverse *Citizens United*, finance election campaigns publicly, and stop the legalized bribery of American politicians? How about slashing the administrative state's vast corporate welfare programs instead of the public interest programs that MAGA hates?

Problem: Unnecessary scarcities. Solution: Democratic planning. Politicians of both major parties spend most of their time arguing about conflicts that need not exist at all if the scarcities that generate them could be eliminated. But it takes planning to reduce scarcity, and to all Reps and most Dems planning is a dirty, "socialist" word.

Isn't this absurd? Since economic planning is tabooed, deep poverty persists, along with the street crime and mass incarceration that it generates. Because Trump hates industrial policy, he relies on tariffs (i.e., corporate welfare) to stimulate domestic industry and gives us — ta dah! — trade wars. With a modicum of community-controlled planning we could develop a rational, humane immigration policy — but the politicians would rather play anti-immigrant games. In one of the world's richest countries, marginalized social groups compete against slightly better-off groups for jobs and college admissions. Why fight over DEI, when with popular control over our economy we could easily create enough jobs and college slots for everyone?

Problem: The American Empire and its endless wars. Solution: Positive peace. Many of Trump's opponents are enraged by his apparent unwillingness to maintain the system of "global order" instituted by regimes since World War II — a system designed to maintain American hegemony as the world's leading military power and international decision-maker. They don't seem to understand that most of the world's people consider Trump's weird mix of selective imperialism, nuclear militarism, and "America First" isolationism an improvement over Biden-era warmongering.

The progressive opposition needs to consider what America's foreign policy should be other than a revival liberal gun-running masquerading as democracy promotion. What does genuine internationalism look like in an era of increasing nationalist prejudice and threats of war? How can peaceful conflict resolution leading to positive peace become the chief driver of U.S. global policy? Reducing the trillion-dollar U.S. military budget by at least half would open the door to secure funding of social security and other needed public services. In international as well as national politics, there is nothing to fear but fear itself.

It's time to talk together about all these issues – and many, many others. Some influential liberals will no doubt warn that “divisive” discussions are dangerous since they could split the party and strengthen Trump – but listening to this sort of “wise advice” is what got us where we now are. By contrast, right-wing ideologues like Steve Bannon risked splitting the Republican party to give it a philosophy and program reflecting their values and capable of energizing a mass base. On the strategic level, the left-hating Bannon understands Marx and Lenin a good deal better than most of those declaring themselves leftists! To prevent Trump and his successors from consolidating a permanent dictatorship of the oligarchs, the Democratic Party needs to become a force for systemic change – or else yield to those capable of forming a genuinely progressive party.

This is why we need discussions now. Reacting to every Trumpian initiative with anger and despair, while refusing to formulate an alternative program to change a broken system, simply plays the MAGA game. I don't want to hear any more denunciations of Trump by outraged Congresspeople or cable news anchors longing for a return to power by the “good” oligarchs and “responsible” generals and spy chiefs. You don't defeat the Far Right by sentimentalizing the Respectable Center.

We need to learn from our mistakes. We need a genuine people's party. And a people's party needs a credible program for positive change. Let's stop obsessing over the Demagogue-in-Chief and get on with the business of creating that program.

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