

Barry Commoner as First Citizen?

Barry Commoner is not running for President. It just looks a little that way these days because he has been on the road promoting the ideas in his new book, *The Politics of Energy*, at the same time he is participating in the formation of a new national political party based on social control of corporate power and transition to renewable energy sources.

Word of plans for the party, tentatively labeled the Citizens' Party, has appeared in several left-wing publications. The progenitors, in addition to Commoner, are David Hunter of the Philip Stern Fund, Archibald L. Gillies of the John Hay Whitney Foundation, and Stanley Weiss, a Washington, D.C., businessman.

A citizens' committee is now in the process of being formed, and organizers plan to issue a prospectus broadly defining the goals some time this month.

The organizers are very wary of being pigeonholed as to doctrine or associated with a particular group (although the *Village Voice* has already suggested that some regard them as the "foundation party" because of Hunter and Gillies' participation).

Telephone calls to the principals were being referred to two individuals. One is Dan Leahy, a hulking, cowboy-booted consultant who is working on setting up the citizens' committee in offices rented by Weiss from the Nuclear Information and Resource Service (which gets money from the Stern Fund). He was most recently involved in the Exploratory Project for Economic Alternatives run by radical Washington economist Gar Alperovitz. The other is Don Rose, who managed the winning campaign of Chicago Mayor Jane Byrne against the Daley machine.

Neither Leahy nor Rose would commit himself to a definitive statement about the purposes of the movement except to indicate that it has to do with redirecting corporate power to serve the needs of society. This means, in particular, reorienting the producers and suppliers of energy toward reliance on nonnuclear renewable energy sources.

The theoretical basis for the movement is supplied in large part by the thinking emanating from Commoner's Center for the Biology of Natural Systems in St. Louis and to some extent from Alperovitz's project. It has also been reported that Gillies, for one, has been much taken by the theories of Harvard Law School professor George Lodge (son of Henry Cabot), as expressed in a 1978 book, *The New American Ideology*, in which he calls for "holistic" state-corporate planning.

The Citizens' Party organizers refuse to speculate on what kind of coalition could make the new party fly—although there have been lengthy talks with consumer and community groups and labor. The hope is to have party machinery in place in time to field a presidential candidate for the 1980 election, and to become a significant national force by 1984. Ultimately, the goal is not to become a third party but to replace one of the existing two parties.

According to Rose, the founding fathers of the citizens' committee feel that the situation in the country is very much as it was in the 1840's and 1850's, when the major issue was slavery and neither party was addressing it. Then Lincoln came along in 1860 and the Whigs were replaced by the Republicans. Now the major issue is corporate pow-

er, and neither party has the nerve to come to grips with it, Commoner and the others believe.

Several names have been raised as possible presidential candidates, including Commoner, Senator Mark Hatfield (R-Ore.), Representative Ronald Dellums (D-Calif.), and Ralph Nader, who himself recently called for a new party to address corporate power—"the major issue of our times." Commoner, asked if he were interested in running, said, "I haven't given it a thought . . . you're asking the wrong question—the question isn't who but what." Commoner, however, did not protest when he was introduced for a speech at the National Press Club as one who was "widely mentioned as a possible alternative presidential candidate," and like a presidential candidate he seemed to have all the answers.

Sticking pretty much to issues surrounding the "solar transition" he promotes in his book, he blamed the gasoline crisis not on OPEC but on the 1973 decision of U.S. companies to raise domestic prices. American industry is not responding to America's energy needs because private enterprise is motivated by the need for profit, which does not coincide with society's needs, he says. Actually, if political obstacles could be overcome, he makes the transition to renewable energy sources sound as easy as falling off a log. By using natural gas as a "bridging fuel" while fossil and nuclear power are phased out—for more natural gas, "all you have to do is get somebody a little bit more polite than Mr. (Energy Secretary James) Schlesinger to talk to the Mexicans"—the country could gradually introduce methane, distilled from biomass, into the existing natural gas pipelines. Ethanol distilled from grain could supplant liquid fuels, and the rest of our needs could be supplied by solar sources: sun, wind, and hydropower.

In his earlier book, *The Closing Circle*, Commoner emphasized that there's no "such thing as a free lunch," but he seems to have changed his mind. By reorienting midwestern agriculture to the production of corn, sugar beets, and hay, he claims, enough methane, alcohol, and fertilizer could be produced to turn the Midwest from a net consumer to a net producer of energy.

So far, no major politician—with an erratic exception supplied by California Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr.—has dared to propose that the only way out of the energy dilemma is through a fundamental redirection of the private sector. Instead, the typical reaction was supplied by Congress when on 26 June the House passed a bill to encourage the development of synthetic fuels—a frantic attempt to placate public outrage over growing gas lines and, in Commoner's view, a "disastrous mistake" because it commits the country to take another step down the dead-end path of nonrenewable resources.

The alternative course now being hammered out by the citizens' committee founders is threatening indeed, as it will promote, among other things, discussion of nationalization of the energy industry. But, as Leahy says, they are convinced that the reason more than half the eligible voters did not vote in the 1978 election is not "apathy" but the fact that "people are waiting for some party or some collection of people that are going to fight for the things they can vote for."—CONSTANCE HOLDEN