

Growing Pains

Without Nader, the Green Party Slips a Rung

BY NATE BLAKESLEE

It was another bad year for Democrats, but they don't have the Green Party to blame this time around. The absence of Ralph Nader at the top of the ballot was keenly felt by Green candidates nationwide. Even strong nominees, like veteran organizer Ted Glick in New Jersey and well-know intellectual Stanley Aronowitz in New York, polled only one percent in their respective races. One of a very few bright spots for Greens was the California governor's race, where Green Party candidate Peter Camejo polled over five percent. The party's poor showing in Texas—no statewide candidate got more than five percent—means the party will have to collect petitions just to get on the ballot for 2004. The Green gubernatorial candidate, anti-war activist and author Rahul Mahajan, got less than one percent of the vote. Mahajan, 33, was born in Philadelphia and has lived in Austin since 1977. He holds a PhD in physics from UT Austin. A fixture at Austin anti-globalization and anti-war rallies, Mahajan's recent book, *The New Crusade: America's War on Terrorism* was well-reviewed, and he is currently at work on a second book, about the war on Iraq, for Seven Stories Press. He spoke to the Observer a week after the election.

Texas Observer: How do you account for the Green Party's poor showing, relative to 2000, in this election?

Rahul Mahajan: I think there were a couple of differences. One is that there was simply much less interest in the campaigns, because Nader wasn't involved, or only partially involved. He did a couple of rallies for some of the candidates. And the other is that I think after 9/11 and the insane warpath of the Bush administration, a lot of progressives decided they had to return to the Democratic fold.

But these elections showed very clearly to me that the Green Party has got to do some serious rethinking, because if we can't break out of this mold, it's not worth continuing this way. It's not that I'm saying I think the Party has to give up—it's that I think we have to seriously consider what's the most effective path for the next four years or so.

TO: If you know you can't be competitive in major races, what is the Green Party's strategy? Is it to pull the Democrats to the left?

RM: Right now the only things we can claim to be doing are: number one, changing the electoral infrastructure through things like instant-runoff voting to open space up for alternative parties, two: to highlight issues we can be certain

the Democratic and Republican candidates will be certain not to highlight. In terms of building an organizational base, which is part of our goal, we've had very rapid growth up to this point. But we're not going to continue that rapid growth without fundamental change.

What we have seen, however, is that sometimes the logic of saying that a Green Party will help to keep the Democratic candidate honest, sometimes it works. If anything, because of the institutional, let's just call it stupidity, of Democrats, it has more often worked the other way. This election was a referendum on several things. One of the things was the Democratic Party's strategy of trying to appear like the Republicans. They lost. What's their remedy? Well [Democratic Congressman] Martin Frost says we've got to look more like the Republicans! [Laughs.] I mean, they're going to continue with this, I can guarantee you. It's like watching slow motion video of a train wreck about to happen. And that means the pressure the Greens put on them is actually not going to help move them to the left. That's my guess.

TO: The most reasoned argument I hear against the Greens is that they should be working to change the Democrats from within, rather than trying to reinvent the wheel with their own party. Have your thoughts on that changed at all after this last election?

RM: I think my fundamental analysis has remained the same. Working within the Democratic Party—yes, it's important that some people do it, and maybe you can make a few incremental gains now and then, but overall it's just a losing strategy. There's a good reason why the entire tide is going the other way. It's also particularly difficult to work within the Party from the grassroots up ever since Clinton and the DLC [Democratic Leadership Council, leaders of the centrist Democrats] decided to essentially cut the Democratic leadership off completely from the grassroots. It's much easier to influence the Republican Party from the grassroots than the Democratic Party. I think this is something people are not taking into account, even though in Texas you can see it. In 1980, the only party with an organizational base everywhere in the state was the Democrats. Now their organizational base has collapsed; there are places where they have almost none. There are lots of places where the Greens have more active people than the Democrats do. The reason is that their strat-



Rahul Mahajan at an anti-war rally in Austin.

Vic Hinterlang

egy of cutting yourself off from the grassroots may help to win some high profile elections, but it dries up the grassroots, and in the long term that's not a good thing.

TO: Do you think Clinton made a conscious choice to snub the grassroots—by endorsing welfare reform, free trade, the balanced budget, etc.—or did he simply acknowledge that the party had atrophied over the years to such a point that it was almost worthless to him? That is, did Clinton and the DLC really kill the party, or did they just sort of make it official?

RM: Well, there were currents the other way, right? At one time Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition represented something hopeful (although you could already see in its beginnings the seeds of its demise). And there was an explicit rejection of that. It started actually with Dukakis, who was the first to say, "Okay, I'm not going to make any concessions to the organizational base of the Democratic Party, to Jesse Jackson, etc." But Clinton solidified that completely. And the thing that I think perhaps some Democrats don't want to think through is that, yeah, Clinton had the White House for eight years, but it's Clinton who killed the forty-year Democratic control of Congress. It's his policies that did it. So the only thing I've learned from this election is that I think it's still completely valid to say that you can't expect much change by working on the Democrats from the inside. Its just very much clearer now how hard its going to be to do it from the outside, [to change] either the Democrats or the public. Shaping the Democrats is only something I'm interested in if it seems to be the most fruitful arena; I have no intrinsic interest or connection with them.

TO: What about the argument that you've got to work for realistic, short term change, too? That you need people inside the system; progressives who lobby the legislature as well as liberal Democrats in the lege itself, like Austin State Rep. Elliott Naishtat, fighting, for example, over whether a health care bill will benefit just 20,000 kids or 100,000 of them. Don't you need a two-tiered approach?

RM: Yes, it makes a difference—of course it does—to those extra 80,000 children. I mean, you'd have to be absolutely heartless to say it's not making a difference to them. But what happens then, of course, is that these considerations of feasibility, and of the current power structure, and of who's better than whom [in office], they set the limits of debate. Yeah, maybe it's going to be 100,000 children, but it's not going to be universal health care. Now of course, talking about universal health care doesn't bring it. I'm not saying that the rootless radical approach is one to take seriously. But you have to have some coordination. You have to have, I think, for the long term, an element of cooperation between people who are focused on the day to day—things where you can actually win fights in the legislature—and people who are trying to build a larger structure and a larger vision, which is going to be based primarily on organizing ordinary people and not on the kind of lobbying and appeals that are the day to day business of people [who work in the legislature].

I don't see that happening. I don't see that kind of connection and coordination. One, [some of these people] are not inclined to take the Green Party and other grassroots radical efforts very seriously. And, two, yes it's true that when you work day to day in the legislature you gain a knowledge and appreciation of what's going on that can't be matched if

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you're not doing it. To understand what can happen, what can't happen, who are the people you need to make the right things happen—you gain all of that understanding, but you also get almost inevitably a very blinkered approach. You stop seeing how to fit all of what you do as a very small part of a big picture. There is a natural tendency to say that the thing you're focused on most is the picture, and to actually step back and say, okay, it's just this tiny, tiny, little piece of a larger picture that I'm part of, is very difficult.

In the long term, if it doesn't happen, you get a bunch of people whose work is very solidly in the mainstream. They're trying to make things slightly, incrementally better, while the entire system is moving to hell. Right? You're making incremental shifts this way, in a ship that is zooming the other way. And on the other hand you have a bunch of people who have a larger radical analysis, but which is sometimes not very incisive and not very realistic, because they are not in tune with what can be accomplished, and which has essential-

ly very little reach and very little power. That's the price [of not cooperating].

TO: *If I did this interview tomorrow with someone that considers herself to be an anarchist, and I said what do you think about the Green Party, she might give me a similar analysis. She might say well the Green Party, they say they're radical, but they're participating through the institutions that already exist, they're going through the electoral process, they want to get into this legislature which is inherently corrupt.*

RM: About the anarchists, one thing I can tell you is that I've been told by a number of anarchists that they personally registered to vote so they can vote for me [laughs].

But I'm not saying that any one method is right. There's only so much you can accomplish within the electoral system. There's only so much you can accomplish if you completely separate yourself from the electoral system. Right now, the fact of the matter is that at the end of the day, mass movements translate into policy decisions at large levels—like the national level or a big state like Texas—only through the medium of people who spend their time walking the halls of power. There's no other way to translate it. One of the concerns that I've always had is that there be enough connection between the mass movements and those people that there's accountability, so that the people who walk those halls don't get automatically pulled over to very mainstream views, which happens especially with inside-the-beltway NGOs [non-governmental organizations, i.e. non-profit advocacy groups]. It's a huge problem.

TO: *We get calls from people excited about something they read in the magazine, and they're ready to do something about it—they want to know where they can sign up. The problem is where to send them.*

RM: Part of this problem is we have this chaos. This anarchy of more groups and more causes than you can count. And very often in left culture we like to celebrate that. We say, look, it shows how diverse we are. But frankly what it shows is a) how disorganized we are, and b) how much politics in this coun-

try is still ruled by good old-fashioned American individualism. It's more important for me to keep my exact way of being in the political world than it is for me to be a part of something that could really have an effect. So yeah, if you're gonna try to build a small number of places where people can sign up, people are going to have to work together as a well-oiled machine without necessarily always agreeing with each other, but being able to say, I'm part of something bigger and it's okay. And that's still a step that people are not making very much.

TO: *For anyone who was at Seattle or any of the big global justice demonstrations—or attended one of the giant anti-war marches in recent months—it's clear that there is a movement bubbling out there, however diffuse it may be at this point. Which group holds the most promise for bringing them all together?*

RM: I haven't seen anything besides the Green Party that has a chance. Unfortunately, the Green Party in terms of the larger progressive movement is still marginal. So it may not make sense for me to say, on the one hand, you can see at least theoretically the potential for the Green Party to become that, and on the other hand, it's a very long way from actually being able to realize the potential.

TO: *Do you see a future for the big street demonstrations?*

RM: I think they'll definitely continue to happen. No matter how they go down, they'll continue to serve some purpose. They're still a way to initiate new people into the realities of the movement. They're one of the biggest reasons you're getting this huge flow of young people into it. I think they will not continue to be very effective if we continue doing them mechanically, in the same way. I think people have to stop and do some serious tactical and strategic thinking. I spend most of my time doing anti-militarist work. But one thing you can say about the military is, they plan out their campaigns with an eye toward winning. We're not

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going to be bombing people, but we need to do the same. Right now the only people I see who really focus their campaigns on winning are the ones we've talked about who are looking very narrowly at what legislative issue can I get passed in this session. Those people plan to win. We need to be planning to win in a broader sense.

TO: *Why can't the Democrats get these kids to come out for them?*

RM: It's funny—I think there's some Republican politicians who appeal to a real hard right. I think that Democratic politicians in general don't have any strong appeal to anybody these days. Our movement has a strong appeal. Unfortunately it's a strong appeal that gets only a small segment of the population moving. What I found in general when I was running my campaign is that the average Texan responded very well to the kind of things I had to say. I doubt they voted for me. They said, okay this guy doesn't have a chance to win. But

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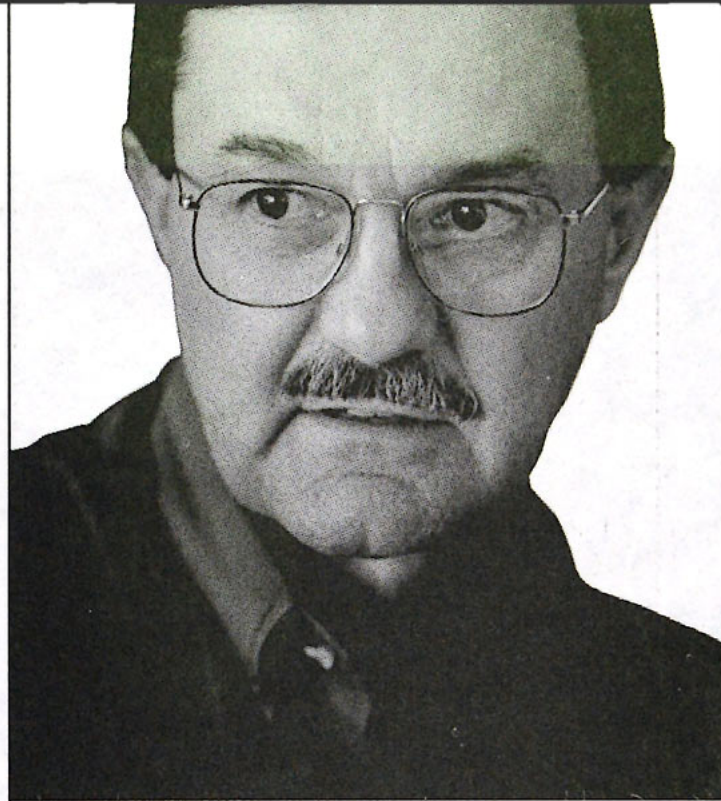
We're not going to be bombing people, but we need to do the same.

they responded very well. Even newspaper editors I talked to, I could sort of tell—they're not very effusive types—but I could sort of tell they were happy to find somebody who was really talking about issues, instead of the kind of nonsense that Perry and Sanchez gave them.

T.O.: *It probably helped that you don't really fit the stereotype of the young radical, which is fairly negative right now.*

R.M.: That's one of the things I try to make sure of. Suppose I'm on conservative talk radio, which I have been many times. There is simply no way in that kind of format to really convince people of a different view. So I settle for simply trying to dispel the stereotype of radicals as uninformed and stupid, which is a stereotype that most people have. It's almost the opposite of the truth. One of the things that is so hard to deal with these days is you've got this community of progressives, especially the activists, who are, relative to the public, phenomenally well-informed. And you have a public that is almost increasingly, everyday, more and more uninformed. As the gap becomes wider, it becomes harder for the progressive community to reach out to this highly uninformed public.

T.O.: *When I interviewed some of the young marchers at demonstrations in D.C. and Los Angeles, I usually asked them why they were here. Some of them had great answers, but some had only a rough grasp of what was going on. I imagine the same must have been*



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true at the big Vietnam demos in the '60s. Is having hangers-on a good thing or a bad thing?

RM: There's no question a lot of young people join because it's a cool thing to do. I don't think there's anything wrong with that, but I don't think that the ratios are the same today. I think that the ratio of people who are very highly informed and have a very intellectualized approach is much higher now than it was in the anti-Vietnam War movement. The information flow is so much faster. Anybody can find out what they want to know now, if they have minimal Internet access. So in many ways the core of the movement is far better-informed than during the Vietnam war, and usually informed by a larger perspective of U.S. policy than they had at that time. But we don't have the same kind of reach.

TO: *Shifting back to the Green Party's prospects, in the short term what is the most likely avenue to crack into the system in Texas?*

RM: I think the state is not so different from the nation. I think a lot is going to hang on whether people can really make the connection between phenomenal wealth and inequality, massive corporate corruption, corporate control of everything, and people's own poverty and lack of access to basic services. The Democrats did a masterful job of not being able to profit from this in this election. It was just stunning to see. I think it's gonna take a lot of work for people to understand exactly what did Enron mean. You know, people are treating it as a joke. Or as one corporate bad apple, and not willing to see the rot of the system, and that it in particular shows the effects of 20 years of deregulation. A lot of

Democrats, of course, who personally took money from Enron felt constrained from saying anything about it. But if somebody can't take up these issues, with just automatic mass populist appeal.... This is a country in which there was a *Business Week* poll done in 2000, two polls, [and] in one of them, 72 percent of Americans—and in the other, 82 percent—said corporations have too much political power. This is the big issue that people see. Even if they're not thinking about it day to day, they do understand that this is the fundamental question facing us. If that issue can't be taken and run with in Texas and the nation it will be very hard to make any headway.

TO: *Why did the Minnesota Greens run a candidate against Paul Wellstone, considered by many to be the most progressive U.S. Senator?*

RM: It was clearly a mistake to run a Green against Wellstone. And I have to say it was not because Wellstone was a great progressive, because he wasn't. Wellstone supported the Desert Fox bombing of Iraq in 1998. He supported the Kosovo war. It was almost as if he opposed wars led by Republican presidents, and he supported wars led by Democratic presidents. He didn't vote against the USA PATRIOT Act. This is not my idea of a progressive. But because he is one of the couple [of] most progressive senators, people saw it as a real negative mark against the Green Party, and therefore I think that's enough of a reason that it shouldn't have been done.

In Texas we're more careful than that. When somebody actually came to the Green Party and said he wanted to run against [liberal Austin Congressman] Lloyd Doggett, he was told in no uncertain terms that, while by state law we can't forbid someone from running, the Greens would do everything we could to make sure he would not get the nomination. And he was essentially persuaded to back out. Because it would have been foolish to run someone against Doggett; we were clear on that. And I think most Green Parties in the country are clear about that. But you know what happens: The one that does something [foolish] is the one that gets all the attention, and the other stories get lost.

TO: *Wellstone was said to be winning at the time of his death, yet his replacement, Walter Mondale, wound up losing. Al From of the DLC said it was an indication that the party needs to stay in the middle. What do you think it means?*

RM: [Laughs.] Mondale spent his whole life in the middle. What does it show? It's hard of course to extrapolate from Minnesota to the rest of the U.S. You could say at least that it tends to show that Democrats who run as Democrats may have a better chance than Democrats who run as Republicans. I do think that overall the Wellstone vote and the national vote tell you the same thing, which is that the Democrats have got to start running campaigns in which the voters can tell that there's some difference. Voters are getting very confused. Of the people who voted against the Iraq resolution, only one of them failed to get reelected, and he was redistricted. I think that's a very strong sign. ■