

"America's Best Political Newsletter" Out of Bounds Magazine

counterpunch

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Weekend Edition December 19-21, 2008

Obama's Appointments Reveal What's Wrong with the Environmental Establishment

Green Myopia

by FELICE PACE

Several of the environmental movement's deep problems were displayed during the December 18th edition of Democracy Now. During the broadcast Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzales conducted interview/debates on two Obama appointments which are critical to the environment – Agriculture Secretary and Interior Secretary. In each case a representative of National Audubon supported the nominations. Opposing the appointment of Tom Vilsack for Ag Secretary was [Ronnie Cummins](#) of the Organic Consumers Association ; Kieran Suckling of the [Center for Biological Diversity](#) critiqued the nomination of Colorado Senator and rancher Ken Salazar as Interior Secretary.

Vilsack's appointment is opposed by many in the organic and sustainable agriculture communities who point to his record as a strong supporter of industrial agriculture, ethanol over food production and genetically engineered crops. Vilsack is reported to accept rides on Monsanto corporate jets – a cozy relationship. Rather than make common cause with progressive agriculture, however, National Audubon and the other members of the environmental establishment support Vilsack's appointment. Democracy Now wanted to know why and the Audubon spokesperson offered Vilsack's support for limits on payments to rich farmers and his support for USDA's conservation programs as reasons.

Apparently National Audubon is clueless about the strategy of big agriculture to shift from crop subsidies to "conservation" subsidies in order to advance free trade agreements at the same time that the USDA "conservation programs" are transformed from benefiting the environment to mainly benefiting Ag producers. This trend was evident in the 2008 Farm Bill process. In the House of Representatives, for example, language in the Farm Bill which would have required a 15% reduction in on-farm water consumption in order for an Ag producer to qualify for EQIP water conservation funding was gutted. Several national environmental groups were complicit in what they called "a compromise" on EQIP.

The Democracy Now debate over the appointment of Salazar as Interior Secretary showcased another fundamental division within the environmental community. Representing the environmental establishment, National Audubon explained its support for Salazar as motivated by a desire to preserve "access" to the Secretary. In contrast the Center for Biological Diversity – which is a product of the movement by grassroots environmental activists to create alternatives to the environmental establishment – is critical of Salazar because of his terrible record on public land issues and the Endangered Species Act.

It appears clear that Salazar will not bring the kind of change that environmental activists would like to see at Interior. The environmental establishment's support for the appointment, therefore, speaks volumes about that establishment's low expectations, overly close identification with the Democratic Party and myopic fixation on "maintaining access".

The environmental establishment's support for Vilsack and Salazar also reveals a much more fundamental problem: their lack of interest in making common cause with progressive movements. The need for alliances of environmental groups and other progressive movements has been emphasized recently in the writings of one of the movement's most distinguished elders – Gus Speth. Now the dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Speth is a founder of NRDC and was head of the Council on Environmental Quality during the Carter Administration.

Writing this October in the Nation, Gus Speth notes that "the environmental community has grown in strength and sophistication, but the environment has continued to deteriorate." Speth finds the cause of the deterioration in "modern capitalism" which he says not only degrades the environment but degrades society and democracy at the same time. In response to this "inherently ruthless, rapacious system," Gus Speth finds "the best hope for change" in "a fusion of those

concerned about the environment, social justice and strong democracy into one powerful progressive force.” Speth also tells us that “this fusion must occur before it is too late.”

If Gus Speth’s prescription for saving the planet and democracy had been applied to efforts to influence the Agriculture and Interior appointments we would not see the environmental establishment represented by National Audubon taking a position which isolates it not only from progressive agriculture but also from the environmental movement’s own grassroots. Instead we would have seen those who want to save the environment, small, organic agriculture and democracy united in support of truly progressive candidates.

So what can be done to change the current myopia of the environmental establishment, to get the big environmental groups to embrace and prioritize “a fusion of those concerned about the environment, social justice and strong democracy into one powerful progressive force”?

There are no easy answers. For one thing we need to be careful that in seeking to reform the environmental establishment we do not destroy institutions whose work in the trenches in Washington DC and state capitals across the country needs to continue. With all their problems the national environmental establishment continues to do good work on a myriad of specific issues. Rather than destroy the environmental establishment we need to radically reform it. How can this be accomplished?

Perhaps the environmental movements own grassroots can show the way. If groups like the Center for Biological Diversity, for example, were to forge strong alliances with other progressive movements – with the peace, justice, democracy, sustainable agriculture movements – the big national groups, the environmental establishment, might wake up and take notice. And if the foundations which fund the environmental establishment began shifting funding to such progressive alliances, then the establishment would not only take notice but would begin to change.

This sort of change has, in fact, happened before. In the 1990s National Audubon and the rest of the environmental establishment were too timid and too concerned about “maintaining access” to consider petitioning to secure Endangered Species Act protection for the Northern Spotted Owl, Coho Salmon or a host of other imperiled species. Instead of accepting that timidity, however, grassroots forest and salmon activists took matters into their own hands. The Northern Spotted Owl was petitioned by a small, little known group from Maine; Coho salmon where petitioned by Northwest and Northern California grassroots activists and scientists. Soon foundation funding began flowing away from the big, establishment groups and toward the dynamic grassroots. One group of those activists became the Center for Biological Diversity.

What happened next is instructive. The environmental establishment suddenly woke up and became less timid. They moved to link up with the grassroots in alliances and coalitions which brought some of the funding back their way and allowed them to continue to claim that they were leading the highest profile environmental and public land movements - including the movements to protect Ancient Forests and Pacific Salmon.

Persuading the environmental establishment to form alliances with other progressive movements will likely require something the establishment will see as equally threatening to their bottom line. Whether coming from foundations or from members who begin to question their performance, funding is a powerful motivator for the environmental establishment.

However it occurs, the grand alliance of movements which Gus Speth envisions is likely the only way to effectively counter the entrenched power of the modern corporate elite and save the earth from the fate those corporate interests ordain. Getting the environmental establishment to embrace such a grand alliance, however, will require a radical shake up – a shake up which demands that the environmental establishment once again become part of a movement with a vision and agenda that is much broader than the narrow objectives of its constituent organizations.