

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Time for a Third Party?

“Alternative Politics” by Michael Kazin, in *Dissent* (Winter 1996), 521 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

From TR in 1912 to Ross Perot 80 years later, there have been quite a few serious independent presidential candidates. But there has not been a national third party with sustained appeal since the populist People’s Party of the 1890s. On the Left today, there are “three notable efforts” being made to change that—but Kazin, a historian at American University, argues for a different way “to get us moving forward again.”

One group with third-party aspirations is the Green Politics Network of radical environmentalists, feminists, and others. At a national conference in Washington last June, some 100 delegates representing 40 tiny organizations issued what Kazin says “amounts to a dream list of the post-’60s Left.” Currently, Green parties exist in 17 states but have access to the ballot in only five. Kazin doubts they will get much further. Nor is the outlook more promising for Labor Party Advocates, founded by a band of left-wing unionists in 1990. “Half a decade later, only three small international unions . . . and a scattering of citywide labor councils have signed on.” The party’s first national conference is scheduled for June.

That leaves the four-year-old New Party, “a racially diverse, feminist, reform-mind-

ed, Green and unapologetically pro-working-people and pro-consumer party,” according to its organizers, who claim a membership of 6,000. “Its strategy,” Kazin notes, “is to build up from strong local chapters that keep their electoral options open,” running its own candidates in some cases, urging votes on its line for major-party candidates in others. To date, the party has run or endorsed candidates in about 115 races, mostly at the city or county level, and 77 have won.

“For all its practical planning, the New Party shares a familiar and critical flaw with its utopian left cousins,” Kazin writes. “All believe they have a natural base among millions of nonvoters” who supposedly would flock “to a third party that spoke to their needs.” This is “an old tune,” Kazin points out, and, unfortunately, there is no evidence to support it.

He urges pragmatic leftists to look instead to an institution that they may too quickly write off: the Democratic Party. “As Ralph Reed and his [Christian Coalition] troops have mobilized within the GOP,” Kazin says, “left activists and intellectuals could work within the other major party to develop and gather strength for a politics of class justice, racial tolerance, and cultural decency.”

‘Bowling Alone’: Frame II

“The Strange Disappearance of Civic America” by Robert D. Putnam, in *The American Prospect* (Winter 1996), P.O. Box 383080, Cambridge, Mass. 02238; “Tuning in, Tuning Out:

The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America” by Robert D. Putnam, in *PS: Political Science & Politics* (Dec. 1995), American Political Science Assn., 1527 New Hampshire Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

If more Americans these days are “bowling alone,” then what is the cause? In a much-discussed article last year [see “The Periodical Observer,” *WQ*, Spring ‘95, p. 137], Putnam, the director of Harvard’s Center for International Affairs, mustered mounds of data to argue that American civil society has dangerously decayed. He captured the trend in one powerful image: even as that all-American communal institution, the bowling league, has been fast declining, Americans are bowling more than ever

before—alone.

“Americans today are significantly less engaged with their communities than was true a generation ago,” he maintains. There have been major declines in membership in groups such as the PTA and in “social trust” (as measured by poll respondents who agree that “most people can be trusted”). This civic decay has occurred despite a massive rise in educational levels; in general, “well-educated people are much more likely to be joiners and