

POINTS OF VIEW

Dems: Reform your party

Remember the famous exchange between Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, when Holmes asked Watson about the dog barking at night? "But there was no dog barking at night," objected Watson. "Precisely the point," responded Holmes.

Sounds a lot like the current state of play of the long overdue and much-needed effort to reform the Michigan Democratic Party.

After their party got whopped again last November, lots of Dems started calling for a less top-down, less labor-dominated, more attractive, more inclusive party. After all, they pointed out, party membership had plummeted from 25,000 in Soapy Williams' days to 6,500. A business and professional section, thriving while Neil Staebler was chairman in the '60s and '70s, had entirely disappeared. Excepting Wayne County Chief Executive Ed McNamara, moderates had been largely squeezed out of party leadership positions.

The results were predictable. In 1994, Big Labor picked the candidate for governor — how lost in a landslide. Last year, Big Labor tried to ram Larry Owen down Democratic throats. Owen was defeated in the primary by Geoffrey Fieger, who promptly experienced his own landslide loss while ridiculing the Institutional Democratic Party as non-existent.

Shortly after the election, top Democrats held a few semi-secret meetings featuring party chairman, Macomb County labor lawyer Mark Brewer, members of Congress, county executives, labor leaders and other activists. No barking dogs emerged, at least not for public hearing.

About the same time, an outfit called Democratic Process for the Millennium started showing up at party gatherings, calling for root and branch reforms. DPM has been holding hearings around the state, calling for a rebirth of the party's vision, talking about new issues, recruiting "little-d democrats" for a volunteer-based organization and arguing for less top-down decision-making.

They've managed to develop some real momentum, especially in Genesee and Oakland counties. If they don't get any response from the Democratic hierarchy, DPM intends to ask for a full-blown special convention to discuss party reform.

DPM is led by an unlikely pair of reformers. John J. "Joe" Collins was party chair during the days of "Boy Governor" John Swainson. Collins went on to a career in insurance before emerging in the Fieger campaign as one of the few people around with any practical political experience. Raymond F. Clevenger, now an Ann Arbor attorney, served a term in Congress in the mid-'60s, representing northern Michigan and the UP.

Collins says his reform efforts are entirely aimed at reviving the Democratic Party. "This is not an attempt to create a third party or to take over the party," he says.



PHILIP POWER

Things are hardly lovey-dovey between Collins and party chair Brewer. Collins claims he's been trying for three months to meet with Brewer to discuss common goals, to no avail. Brewer says, "I'm ready to meet with him. I have no idea what his agenda is. If he wants to work within the party, that's great. If he wants to start a third party, I'm opposed." Collins says, "Any attempt to portray what we're doing as creating a third party is just paranoia." Woof, woof.

Brewer has responded to DPM pressure by launching his own series of regional forums designed to listen to party activists, talk about issues, see how the party can work better and so forth. "The claim that organized labor controls the party is over-played," says Brewer. He cites as evidence Debbie Stabenow (opposed by organized labor in the gubernatorial primary in 1994 and now the odds-on favorite to run against Sen. Spencer Abraham), Geoffrey Fieger (cordially detested by labor topsters) and Don Tucker, the Ed McNamara-backed successful candidate for Attorney General.

All the same, nobody seriously disagrees with the idea that there is something very wrong with the Michigan Democratic Party, in recent years notably a big loser in marked contrast to other Democratic parties around the country that have been doing pretty well.

Don Tucker, a long-time Democratic activist and one-time Oakland County party chair, says the party is "moribund" and argues that the DPM folks are "on to something, because a lot of people are frustrated there's no vehicle for party reform."

The old coalition of organized labor and urban minorities plus assorted liberals and trial lawyers doesn't make up a compelling base for a modern political party in an economy increasingly driven by suburbanites, knowledge workers and entrepreneurs. I, for one, would love to hear more dogs barking in the night.

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail: at ppower@coonline.com

Student was glad for home

GUEST COLUMNIST

Today was the scariest day of my life. I've been around for almost 17 years, but I have never felt so scared. The thought of never seeing my parents again, or my sisters, or even my stuffed animal that I sleep with every night, suddenly sunk into my head. "Will I ever drive my new car again?" I thought nervously to myself. I couldn't believe that this substitute was staying in the classroom, that he wouldn't leave. With all that was going on, I was surprised that none of the administration had made any announcements. "Why isn't school canceled?"

Thinking to myself that I would never be able to fully experience everything that was left for me to experience almost broke my heart. Not being able to hug my friends again, not being able to smile one last time. Each thought kept haunting me. For just an instant, I really thought I was going to die. I thought I was going to die sitting beside two kids I barely know, in a room half-empty, with a strange substitute doing nothing but staring at us. I wanted to be with my friends. I wanted to be with my family. I wanted to be anywhere else than where I was.

I was never prepared for this type of thing. Not once did I ever go to a seminar explaining what to do in this type of a situation. I was scared. I'm a smart girl, but I didn't know where to go. I didn't know what to do if he came into my room. What would he make me do? Would he torture me? He would ask for all of my money before he left. And I would give the \$2 folded neatly in my pocket. It was all I had, \$2. I thought to myself how I could give him my money, and maybe he wouldn't hurt me. Oh, but that was such a silly thought. They don't want your money, you know. They want more than that. They want power.

My substitute passed out a ditto. He told us we had until Monday to turn it in. It was Friday. I thought a lot about my friend Nicole, who said she had heard her school had a bomb threat, too. "I wonder if she's OK," I thought to myself. We were supposed to go out together on Saturday. Would we be going anymore? Maybe neither of us would be.

I questioned the kids beside me. "Aren't you scared?" "No," he replied. "At least if we die, we all die together." What a sick mind that kid had. I was scared. I was shaking. And no one was helping me. I couldn't stand it anymore. I asked to use the restroom and went to the pay phone by the front office. Walking down the long halls, I thought of what might be happening in any of

the classrooms. Our security is terrible with all the construction that is going on. Anyone could walk into the building and hurt us all. I was frightened.

I got to the phone quickly. You walk fast when you're scared. I was very cautious when I turned corners, looking both ways to see if he was around me. I called mom. I called home. I called grandma. Finally, someone was home. Grandma listened as I cried, as I tried to talk softly so he wouldn't hear me. What if he was behind me, and he was mad because I knew. That would be it. I would be gone.

When I hung up the phone, I was going to go to the attendance office, where Grandma was going to call. The hall monitor stopped me. "What's wrong?" he asked. I told him. I asked him why we were in school. "Why don't you just send us all home?" I told him that it was an awful idea to keep us all there when there was a bomb threat. He took me to the assistant principal, who told me that what I heard wasn't true. "But the substitute said so," I explained.

She told me that everything we heard was rumors, and that the substitute didn't know what he was talking about. She told me everything about all the local bomb threats. She told me about how some kid took a toaster to school last week and told people it was a bomb. And she said it would all be OK, that they would close school immediately if they ever heard such a thing. Then we called my mom.

The assistant principal talked to her as I tried to calm down. I was still quite shaken up, so the assistant principal excused me for the last 45 minutes remaining of the day. "Go home and calm down," she told me. Then she, along with the principal, walked me back to class. I got my books while the principal talked to my class. He explained briefly what was explained to me about the rumors and the lies. Everything was all right.

I went home then, still scared. I walked in and hugged my parents. I went to my room and sat on my bed. I listened to my answering machine. I checked my e-mail. I picked up my stuffed animal. I petted my dog. I drank some water right out of the faucet in my bathroom, and I looked carefully around my house. "I'm glad I'm home," I thought. "I'm glad I'm home."

Sarah Davies is a Farmington High student.

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