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The Other Lessons of the Democratic Charter Commission

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THE OTHER LESSONS OF THE DEMOCRATIC CHARTER COMMISSION

The final days of the Democratic Charter Commission and the weekend of the unprecedented Kansas City Mini-Convention were filled with the heat of the battles over quotas, affirmative action plans, proportional representation and the more or less classic Democratic Party battles between the old guard and the reformist insurgents. The last meeting of the Democratic Charter Commission had ended in a dramatic walk-out by the Blacks, and the press was looking for a bit more of the Democratic blood to be spilled in the December cold of Kansas City.

Yet, almost incredibly, the December Mini-Convention, charged with the task of completing the work on what was to be the first constitution of a major American political party, ended what had been feared would be a late night session by adjourning itself with a completed document by 8 o'clock in the evening. What was even more startling than the fact that the meeting had completed its work was that it did so in what, for the Democratic Party, was a reasonably amicable manner. To be sure, the so-called “regulars” took a brisk defeat in the final hour, and within a few days, the cries from organized labor waxed and waned in their threat to abandon the party to the liberals. But, in another sense, the immediate sting of their defeat was truly compensated for by a feeling of relief, for the adopted charter was a far cry indeed from the proposals of the earlier reformist drafts. All in all, there may have been some significance in the way that the Kansas City Convention and the preceding work of the Charter Commission dealt with its problems, and, although one or two of the Charter’s issues may yet have to be resolved by interpretation and by the language of the by-laws, the resolution of the struggle in Kansas City was both firm and decisive, and it was one which should bring some hope for the long-range future of the Democratic Party.
A SHORT HISTORY

Looking at the Commission and the Convention in perspective requires us to remember as far back as the tumultuous Chicago confrontation of 1968. That conventions' backlash led to a number of reforms within the party, and the McGovern-Fraser Commission, which later became the Fraser-O'Hara Commission, began to grapple with a Party charter considerably in advance of the Miami Convention of 1972.

The Charter proposal which was eventually submitted to the Rules Committee in Miami was one which, though it had not generated a great deal of publicity, nonetheless disturbed a number of those party regulars who were familiar with its provisions. In its basic design, the proposed reform Charter could best be called a participatory document. It held within it the promise of a Democratic Party which would allow the kind of grass roots activity which the political mode of the 1960's held in such high esteem. Quite naturally, the office-holders, state party chairmen and other more or less established elements of the Party saw this as a threat to their ancient prerogatives.

Opposition to the Charter from the regulars came late, but by shortly before the opening of the 1972 Convention, Donald Fowler, the South Carolina State Chairman, was able to come to Miami Beach with an alternate draft which reflected the thinking of many other state chairmen as well as several of the more prominent labor leaders. This challenging draft was a conventional document, and admittedly one which changed only slightly the already existing, but non-codified structure of the National Democratic Party. Its drafters, however, did endorse such reforms as the Convention-adopted expansion of the Democratic National Committee, an expansion which clearly liberalized the make-up of a committee which previously had been almost exclusively the domain of large locally-oriented financial contributors.

Yet, if the “regulars” charter lacked originality, its responding to the Rules Committee Charter could be justified on at least two levels, both of which were attractive to at least some portion of the 1972 conventions' delegates. The first justification was simply that the conventional charter reminded everyone that the advocates of participatory democracy had themselves been somewhat less than participatory in their own process of recommending a charter to the party. Probably ninety percent of the Convention delegates had no idea that a charter had been proposed for their Party, an omission which was compounded in its significance by the fact that the reform proposals, quite candidly patterned after the European parties of the Left, would have brought about major changes in the structure of the National Democratic Party.
Of course the merits of these changes themselves were, and still are debatable, but the very fact that the heartiest proponents of their passage at the time of the Miami Convention, most notably Congressman O'Hara of Michigan, had, by the year 1974, largely rethought many of the most reformatory provisions, is probably the best argument for the presentation of the conventional draft.

Nonetheless, whatever the relative merits of the two opposing documents, the 1972 Miami Convention played out its allotted four days, and thanks in great part to the intercessions of Senator McGovern himself, neither Charter was submitted for Convention consideration. The only significant change in the party structure which the delegates did approve involved the already mentioned change in the make-up of the Democratic National Committee, but the two principal questions of (a) delegate selection and (b) the Party Charter were both left to convention-created Party commissions.

THE ORIGINAL CONFLICTS

The differences between the two original Charter proposals had been quite substantial, yet, following the 1972 convention, it was clear that these differences actually revolved around a relatively small number of central questions. One was the issue of membership, with the reformers proposing the creation of not only a card-carrying legion of party faithful, but suggesting the imposition of a membership fee as well to attest to the extent of an individual's Party loyalty. The regulars balked at such an appeal to European-style loyalty, and the membership question soon acquired the distinction of being, from the regulars point of view, the most unacceptable of all the reforms.

The proposal for an off-residual year Policy Conference was opposed almost as strongly by the regulars, and the question of the independence of both the Finance Council and the Education and Training Council from the direct supervision of the National Committee was also emerging as an issue for debate. As for the structure of the new party, the reformers' suggestions evidenced their long-held concern over the power of the chairman, particularly as this power was usually manifested in an ability to bully the membership of the DNC. The reformer's remedy for this dominance was a simple one; to construct an Executive Committee which would not be chosen either by or from the membership of the National Committee itself, but instead to create a body which would serve largely as a check upon both the parent committee and on the chairman.
And thus, around these and less significant structural issues, the original lines of division in the Democratic Charter Commission were drawn. In sum, the Fowler “regulars” draft essentially represented a position of (a) conventional lines of authority within the party structure, (b) a muting of policy consideration which would come from within the party, and (c) a strong opposition to the notions of European Party membership; while the reform charter represented (a) a more diffuse structural organization, (b) a heightening of the Party’s responsibility in policy considerations, and (c) an attempt to foster closer personal identification with the party on the part of at least some portion of the citizenry.

THE DIVISION

The debates within the Charter Commission involved these central divisions between the reform and regular positions, and, as might have been expected, it was not long before the divisions among the members of the Commission began to find themselves represented by two, reasonably well-defined adversary caucuses. The regulars and the reformers, who had learned rather quickly who was on their side and who was not, began to write letters, hold meetings, and compose their strategies for the coming battles. Of the two groups, the regulars were better organized, with caucuses being held frequently during Commission meetings, and the details of such strategies as timing of amendments and managing debates on the floor of the meetings being arranged in a regular fashion.

The reform caucus met less frequently, and, at least at the early meetings, it seemed to lack the competitive precision of the regulars. The result, of course, was that the reformers were losers in virtually all of the early debates, and the make-up of the Charter seemed to be moving rather steadily toward that of the conventional document.

As a consequence of these early reformist defeats, the only major questions which were left to be settled by the time of the Kansas City Convention were the questions of affirmative action, proportional delegate representation and such things as the mandatory nature of the Policy Conference and a reformer-sponsored appeal for a Judicial Council. Although much was written, and indeed written with some justification about the severity of argument concerning these more or less substantive issues, the truly significant matter was that the basic questions of structure and form had already been pretty well decided. Some of the issues fostered bitter battles, as for example, the debates that consumed the early Charter Commission meetings over the question of membership. The regulars won the day, and, interestingly, their efforts
were largely successful because of telling structural arguments such as the whole idea of membership that would more than likely exclude more people from thinking of themselves as Democrats than it would include. The question of regional policy conferences was also lost to the reformers early in the sessions, and again, it was lost for the rather pragmatic reasons that (a) the act of regionalizing the country's state parties was looked upon as probably more divisive than conciliatory in the long run, as well as (b) that the expense of such regional conferences would simply be prohibitive for a party which had been having so many financial difficulties.

In similar ways, the questions of the separation of the executive committee from national committee and arguments over the size of the national committee were slowly turned against the reformers, again for pragmatic and structural reasons. The Education and Training Committee, as well as the Finance Committee were also both duly returned to the authority of the National Committee where the regulars wanted them to be.

THE LESSONS OF DIFFERENTIAL SOLUTIONS

In reflection, therefore, the experiences of the early meetings of the Charter Commission and of the Kansas City Mini-Convention were such as to suggest that in matters of great dispute, particularly in new areas of debate, it is the structural or nonideological questions which tend to be resolved first. They, more than the ideological questions, are subject not only to structural solutions, but perhaps every bit as importantly within the context of a politically adversary forum, the issues can be discussed and debated in nonideological terms.

It is one of the real lessons of the Commission and Convention debates that not only are there different kinds of political arguments but that different kinds of arguments tend to get resolved in different ways. Structural kinds of disputes are subject to a kind of rationalistic discussion. The reasons for resolving the structural charter issues one way or the other were reasons that did not create ideological favor toward one point of view or the other. They were, therefore, able to be resolved in the spirit of finding what was perceived to be the best structural arrangement for the party as a whole.

Those issues, and there were several, which could have been perceived as either structural or ideological, were for the most part argued as structural issues and therefore again for the most part, they were fortunately well on the way to being resolved by the time of Kansas City. It was really on the more purely ideological issues, those issues
concerning such things as quotas, affirmative action, proportional representation and the like, which were left for what was expected to be the difficult day and night in Kansas City. The resolution of these issues, of course, has been adequately chronicled in the media, and we will not review those resolutions here. For our purposes, we should reflect not only on how quickly different kinds of issues were resolved, as we have already mentioned, but on what lessons can be known from the way these particular structural issues were resolved among those who fought so diligently for their point of view.

THE LESSONS OF RETROSPECT

The contestants in the battle of the Democratic Charter, we should not forget, were people of worthy intellect and worthy ideals. Yet, hardly in contradistinction to the worthiness of either mind or purpose, we should remember that this novel assortment of people was drawn overwhelmingly from the ranks of those who practice politics on a more or less regular basis in one arena or another. They were practitioners, and their very appointment to the Commission and to a lesser extent their election to the Convention, attested to their relative success in their own political endeavors.

Nonetheless, although they were practical politicians who played out a very important role in the formation of a major party constitution, they at the same time may not have recognized that the very future of their party could rest upon their ability to square their continued practical political familiarity with a recognition of what the role of their newly constituted party is in the context of an increasingly troubled national polity. In the final portion of this analysis, therefore, let us examine the issues of the Democratic Charter with some greater specificity, and let us suggest that it is the structural questions, and not the substantive issues; those which were resolved in the early days of the Commission and therefore did not receive the shining publicity which the ideological issues did, that do in fact hold the better key to the lessons which we should have learned from the entire Charter discussion.

As we more closely examine these structural issues, we can see that a few of the lessons are universal, and they can just as fruitfully be learned by one of the adversary sides as by the other. It is increasingly clear, for example, not only by what is going on within our nation, but by what the internal politics of the commission turned out to be as well, that strong political parties are now desperately needed as a part of the American political system. The building of the two caucuses, and
the eventual time-saving and pain-saving bargaining which took place between the leaders of the caucuses, was but a microcosm of how a real system of viable political parties should properly perform. There is a synthesis of issues within the national politic, just as there was a synthesis of issues with those two groups on the Commission which wanted either a participatory or a conventional political structure for their party. The very recognition of that synthesis, and the recognition of the differences between the two competitors, was itself the major catalyst which enabled the leadership of both sides to bargain effectively for the good of the whole Commission.

Also, just as there were lessons for the entire Commission, so too were there unique lessons for each of the sides. The regulars should have learned at least two lessons from their participation on the Charter Commission, the first being that they need not fear full participation from that great number of people who wish desperately to be considered a part of the Democratic Party. The history of political growth in the American democracy, a history which the Democratic Party since the days of Jefferson and Jackson can reasonably take a unique pride, is a history of the inclusion into politics of new and previously excluded elements of the population. Some of the regular's reservations about the changes in party structure were certainly justified, but the inclusion of widely divergent peoples, who often hold widely divergent opinions, has always bred new life into the Democratic Party, as well as into the nation's politics. It should now be clear that the more regular elements of the established organization should never be afraid of such involvement.

Secondly, the regulars may have learned even a greater lesson about the very topic that it was probably most correct about throughout the history of the Charter debate. True enough, the party structure is probably best maintained as a reasonably conventional and authoritative structure, but in a larger sense, the full structure of any viable political party should not only permit, but indeed encourage, the subtle interplay between those officeholders and party personnel who too often think of themselves as being the whole party, and those already Democratically-identified citizens who are and who simply wish to remain as voters, agitators, or just plain "outsiders" who sometimes give the party more hell than money. The resiliency within a party not only stems from a subtle interplay between its own mechanisms and the government's mechanisms, but also from the flexibility which just as firmly represents those often ephemeral relationships between the party structure and even the most occasional of party identifiers. They are all Democrats, and in the long run, the Party is greatly benefitted by even this occasional and sometimes abrasive interaction with regular party elements.
On the other hand, not all the lessons of the Charter history can be learned by the regulars. The reformers demonstrated that they had their blindspots as well, and if two examples stand as representative, let them also deal with the structure of the party and the relationship of that structure to something outside of pure party. It was always assumed by the reformers that as the need for the recognition of political issues increased, and as the awareness within a populace of its political nature increased, the political parties of that system would then need to be such that the contested, ideologically pregnant, issues of the day would be visibly pressed to the surface. To a degree, there is no argument that a political party must be one of the central vehicles for the raising and crystallization of public issues. But there are limits to such a direct relationship between issue and structure. At some point, usually at a place dictated by the limits to ideology which a nation's history and culture place upon it, the relationship between productive issue-orientation and streamlined political structure becomes inverse, and an attempt to breed political solutions through structural facilitation of raw issue input will more often than not become counter-productive to the party's long-range success.

The other lesson which the reformers should consider also has to do with ideology, but it is not simply a matter of the relationship of ideology to political structures. This is a subtler question and it has to do not with the relationship of structure and ideology but instead has to do with the tolerance of any political system for bold and sometimes abrasive ideological considerations. We should learn, if from nowhere else than from the Charter Commission's work itself, that it is the patently ideological questions which are the most difficult of swift and conciliatory resolution. The United States has always deemphasized the role of ideology in its politics, and in part, as we said earlier, this ideological abstinence is a result of a uniquely American history and culture. Changes may well be occurring within the American political mode which will make ideology more important, both because of the growing need for synthesis in public issues, and because of the increasing weakness of governmental structures, particularly that melifluous yet often inept institution known as the United States Congress. The reformers are probably right in saying that ideology is often complementary to operant government structure and therefore when the formula of piecemeal solution of piecemeal problems, which has been the American method of public enterprise for its nearly two hundred years, begins to fail in bringing real solutions to highly integrated public problems, the role of ideology in the framing and resolutions of public issues will inevitably increase.
What the reformers must remember, however, is that there are deep dangers which stem from the fresh input of harsh ideological flavorings within a nation. Any country, particularly one as inherently non-ideological as the United States, cannot tolerate unmasticated chunks of deeply abrasive advocacy with its system. Hopefully, the reformers are aware of this limit to a polity's ideological digestion, and hopefully, the reformers will remember that at least to a great degree, the issues which are brought before the people must be put there not by the party, but by the candidates of the party themselves.

THE HOPE FOR THE PARTY

In short, therefore, a brief review of the working out of the more significant debates over the Democratic Charter tells us that there were lessons for both sides of the Charter advocates, and that the reformers and the regulars alike must at least be willing to recognize that the responsibility for long-range stability within the American polity lies with the constructiveness of reform suggestions, just as strongly as the regulars must be aware that their day-to-day participation in the Party must be complemented by the continuous and often abrasive pecking away which comes with reform movements.

One has to hope that the Democratic Party has now lived with the awful memories of the days of Chicago in 1968 long enough, and that as the current burdens of inflation, recession, oil and all the rest pile over us, the way that the Democrats did business in one set of political debates may serve as a lesson for the party's future operation. If so, then the newly constituted Democratic National Party may well be able to play its proper role in helping to lift our country out of one of the most difficult sets of problems we have been in in a good long while.