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LOOKING TO SINCLAIR FOR A HAPPY END TO A TALE OF TWO L.A.S

By PETER DREIER and ROBERT GOTTLIEB. The Los Angeles Times. June 27, 1999

"We have a plan," the candidate declared, to change the political landscape and End Poverty in California (EPIC). Upton Sinclair made his declaration 65 years ago, then launched a quixotic yet magical and nearly successful campaign for governor of California. Although Sinclair failed to win, his EPIC campaign brought together a progressive coalition that altered state politics for nearly three decades.

Today, progressives are again trying to change a political landscape, this time in Los Angeles. This new wave of coalition-building began last October at the Progressive L.A. conference at Occidental College. More than 500 participants explored how to forge a vision and policy agenda to change the public debate about the region's future. This included constructing a platform to influence the 2001 mayoral race, as well as identifying the unifying themes to guide progressive politics in the future.

At one level, the reason for devising a Sinclair-like plan for L.A. is straightforward. Despite the region's economic recovery, declining welfare rolls and proclamations of cleaner air, its problems reach deep into the fabric of daily life, not only for the poor but for the middle class, as well. There are two Los Angeleses, and the divisions between them are not just racial but also economic and geographic. There are vast discrepancies in income, with huge profits and bonuses for a select few and lack of a living wage and decent benefits for many workers. There is a lack of affordable and good quality health care; protracted food insecurity and hunger; a scarcity of affordable housing; toxic hot spots in communities already overburdened with environmental hazards; underfunded schools; and a shortage of adequate transportation.

There are numerous grass-roots and advocacy groups working on these issues. Their collective actions foster a vibrant but largely unrecognized community and workplace democracy. They also constitute the political foundation for a progressive L.A.

With few exceptions--the successful campaign for a living wage for employees of city and county contractors, to name one--these groups rarely unite around a common vision, program or strategy. They tend to be separated by issues and geography. Although they share many basic principles, they typically work in relative isolation. Even groups that work on similar concerns--housing, the environment, union organizing or health care, for example--often ignore each other. As a result, they are constantly fighting their battles without sufficient allies. This is a recipe for maintaining the status quo.

Not surprisingly, most policymakers and government officials tend to ignore or downplay the concerns of these grass-roots activists. Working in isolation, limited in resources, lacking access to power, L.A.'s diverse social movements nevertheless offer an enormous, unrealized capacity to create a new progressive politics in L.A. The task of a Sinclair-type movement would be to find a common ground among these issue-oriented and neighborhood-based activists. Like Sinclair's EPIC platform, a progressive L.A. agenda can provide an alternative to business-as-usual politics dominated by corporate money, corporate ideas and corporate-sponsored politicians.

But will such efforts succeed? Can the city's newly activist labor movement join forces with community activists working to expand affordable housing? Can bus riders and public-transit advocates work with those addressing land-use issues like sprawl? Can activists mobilizing to improve access to health care find common cause with groups fighting for environmental justice? Can campaign-reform advocates link arms with those advocating women's rights? Can each of these activist groups work together across racial lines?

Three key principles illustrate a common starting point: social justice, livable communities and democracy. The struggle for greater economic and social justice is an essential component of a progressive L.A. agenda. Living-wage campaigns and union organizing among manufacturing and service workers typify this arena. More resources for underfunded schools is another. The struggle for livable communities is a second component. The region still has the nation's dirtiest air basin. We have, per capita,

fewer green spaces--parks and gardens--than any comparable city in the country. Too many people live in slum housing, rely on overcrowded buses and lack such basic services as a bank or supermarket in their neighborhoods. A progressive L.A. agenda must address these problems, especially in the nation's capital of suburban sprawl. The struggle for greater political participation is the third essential part of a progressive L.A. vision. The social movements of progressive L.A. represent the cutting edge of a renewed democratic discourse. This month's city elections reflected both widespread alienation from mainstream politics--less than one-fifth of eligible voters went to the polls--and a yearning for greater community involvement in decision-making, as evidenced by the victory of the charter proposal creating neighborhood councils. But the heart of that struggle for more democracy is the battle over money. Money corrupts politics; it has made us the most undemocratic nation among industrial countries in terms of voter participation. Progressive L.A. would seek to limit the power of money in politics and promote the power of civic and public participation in decisions affecting daily lives.

The issues, social movements and opportunities to shift the political debate in Los Angeles are present, and a progressive L.A. agenda can be the catalyst that unifies their energy. If it does so, it will change politics, and daily life, in the region for the 21st century.

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