

Greens' Stein Faults Two-Party System

Some Democrats blame Jill Stein for “siphoning off” crucial votes from Hillary Clinton and thus helping to elect Donald Trump, but Stein insists that the two-party straitjacket is the real enemy of democracy, reports Dennis J Bernstein.
By Dennis J Bernstein

Former Green Party presidential candidate, Dr. Jill Stein, remains undaunted in her belief that the only real and significant change in U.S. politics will come through a third party that can finally break the headlock that the Democrats and Republicans hold on the electoral system.

Stein, who has been running for state and federal office since her unsuccessful run for Governor of Massachusetts in 2002, has yet to win an election and received about 1.4 million votes (or about 1 percent of the total) in the presidential election of 2016.

I spoke with her on March 10 about what comes next for her and the Green Party, as well as her thoughts on the policies of both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

Dennis Bernstein: You are here in San Francisco, doing a bunch of things. But you're going to be participating a little bit later in an action in support of Standing Rock and indigenous rights. And I want to ask you for your gut reaction to seeing that almost the first thing that Donald Trump did was go after the indigenous communities, and get those pipelines pumping heavy crude.

Jill Stein: It's a sign of what we're up against: this incredibly authoritarian, neo-fascist, anti-human rights predator, and who has pretended to be a friend of the working people, and who has really been revealed in all of his glory with his billionaire cabinet composed of people who are attacking the very cabinet departments that they are said to be head of. Who is enlarging the military, expediting the pipelines, expediting all sorts of destructive fossil fuel projects, attacking immigrants. It's really reigning down on all sides.

The issue of indigenous rights, and pipelines and Standing Rock, brings so many of these issues together. With incredible courage, and vision, and passion, that so engaged the hearts and minds all across America, that we all saw that we are all Standing Rock. That this is where democracy... our rights to protest, indigenous rights, human rights, and our right to air, and water, and the climate that we can live in. They all converge.

And, it's like the match here that lit the fire is just the passion of our indigenous brothers and sisters who are ready to stand up. Not just for them:

they're standing up for us all. And that passion is not going away. They may be evicted for now, but the fight is going on. It's continuing in court. It's continuing in the local struggles against, I guess, what's called the Klamath River Pipeline [Pacific Connector Pipeline], and LNG [liquid natural gas] Pipeline, that's going to go under the Klamath River, and put it at great risk.

The important thing here is that we've been successful in stopping fossil fuel projects over the past two years. That has really put the fear of God into this industry. They are in the process of becoming stranded assets. They're trying to hurry up and get them built before they are no longer financially viable.

DB: The price is so low, they can't even sell the stuff.

JS: And so, the important thing here is for us to just... to double down. And to be strengthened, to be encouraged, to get past their propaganda of powerlessness, and to know that we still have the numbers, in spite of the election of Donald Trump, which was an obvious distortion of the system.

But even more than that, it's a system that's become so toxic, so predominated by big money, corporate money, and corporate media, that it's become unhinged. We have an unhinged, toxic political system. Donald Trump represents, really, the breakdown of this bi-partisan system that people have lost faith in.

Polls last year, well, early on in the election, showed 90% of Americans have lost confidence in our political institutions, in the bi-partisan system in Congress, the Executive, and the Judiciary. You can't get more explicit than that, 90%.

At the other end, at the very end of the election, it was 80% of the people who described their feelings towards the election as one of disgust. And the American people are ready to move on. Had we... we were like one open debate from totally throwing out the bums, and moving forward to the future we deserve.

And everything that we're hearing now, both in what the extraordinarily destructive actions of Donald Trump, but it's like the neoliberal runaway that he launched from, the deportation of three million immigrants, the meltdown of the climate, where the White House was signing an end to the export ban of fossil fuel. They were actually signing the dotted line to end that ban. In other words, to enable the export of fossil fuels again, while the Paris Accords were being signed. So, with one hand they're claiming this great environmental world, with the other they're just massively increasing.

So, the point here is we need to move forward. We need to break up with this abusive political relationship. We need to go forward with the future we deserve, because we're out of time, and it's on us. We're the ones we've been

waiting for. We have the power, people are standing up, joining in. Follow the example of Standing Rock. We can fix these problems.

DB: I love that poem by June Jordan, put to music by Sweet Honey in the Rock [...] and I notice that that was sort of the anthem that played in the beginning of the Women's March, in Washington, D.C. June Jordan is of this community, contributed to this show. So, we're happy that she is still being evoked.

Well, let's talk about what's happening today. You have some expertise. We all saw the dangerous possibilities of the ObamaCare program. We're seeing something else go on now. You have some knowledge here, you want to talk about this?

JS: Sure. So, ObamaCare was a very mixed bag. We should have had Medicare For All, a single-payer system. Healthcare is a human right. ObamaCare was basically RomneyCare, writ large. It was essentially a national roll out of what we did in Massachusetts, under Mitt Romney, who launched that RomneyCare movement in order to stop single-payer. That's really where all of this originated, because single-payer was going like gangbusters in Massachusetts. We very nearly won a referendum that was only beat back by about two percentage points, having been outspent by 30 – 1 or 50 – 1, whatever it was, by the industry.

DB: It got really close.

JS: It was, and that's why they came up with this diversionary measure. So, it expanded Medicaid, that was great. It did some other things, no pre-existing conditions, etc. It made care affordable for people who were poor.

But for working people it created this mandate. You shouldn't be funding health care for some people on the backs of other people. We should be funding health care through the incredible abundance of this country. We are not a country of scarcity. We are not a country of austerity.

We are a country that is being bankrupted by a military budget that has just gone hog-wild, which Donald Trump wants to further expand. But it's pretty toxic to start with. It's over 50% of our discretionary dollars. It's almost half of your income taxes going for what? For wars, and regime change that has created failed states, mass refugee migrations, and worse terrorist's threats.

So, this doesn't fix the problem. More of a catastrophic policy of militarism – we're about to go into Syria now, with ground troops – that's not going to make it better. This, again, is yet another reason why this is a Hail Mary moment [a desperate effort with little chance of success].

And it's not only that our water is at risk, our climate is melting down, and in fact, that melt down is accelerating. An entire generation of young people are

locked in debt, jobs are just not sustainable when average wages for workers are barely at the poverty level. We're not going to get out of here alive.

DB: [...] What do you think is going to happen here? What's your best assessment of... we know where the Republicans are going with this. They're hell-bent on passing this stuff. There's going to be some resistance but essentially they're going to be able to get whatever they want. What are the implications?

JS: Well, it's not clear that they will. And back to the subject on the table about TrumpCare. There's not agreement about this, at all. It may not pass either House. And Trump is not a uniter, in spite of what he says. It's very clear he's not a uniter. He doesn't bring people together, doesn't have, kind of, higher order passions and visions.

DB: I haven't seen him smile once since he's been elected.

JS: I know.

DB: You notice that? God, they're disappointed they won.

JS: Not him, and not his wife either, who really looks miserable. The two of them on Election Day... [and] ... on Inauguration Day it looked like they were at a funeral. They did not expect this. Now, he's being progressively cornered. He's had to lose some of his key advisors, he's lost some key cabinet positions, his ratings continue to plummet. They were rock bottom to start with. He is a land mine of liabilities: legal, constitutional and ethical liabilities. There's just case after case, lawsuits against him. His immigrant policy is about to be stopped again, for the second time. So, this is a guy who should not be in office. He's being stopped.

I think it's important for us to remember Richard Nixon, one of the most corrupt and authoritarian presidents in our history. What did we do under the rule of Richard Nixon? We brought the troops home from Vietnam. We established women's right to choose, from a very conservative Supreme Court. We got the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, OSHA, protecting workers' health and safety. How did we do that? We did it because we were out in the streets with a passion knowing that our lives were on the line, because our brothers were being sent to die, to Vietnam.

Well, guess what? Now, we've woken up to find our lives are on the line again, whether it's from poverty and homelessness; a generation locked into unpayable student debt; from the expanding war which is blowing back at us with a vengeance; from the climate [warming] which is now accelerating, given the news last week that the meltdown of permafrost is well established, and is moving forward at horrific speed. And all the dire predictions from Jim Hansen, that we

could see 10 or 20 feet of sea level rise, as soon as 2060. That's not far away.

Well, guess what? Those predictions are coming far closer now, because those models did not include the impact of methane. We didn't know when this was going to hit. The meltdown of the permafrost, for those who aren't familiar, it's basically frozen, organic debris, like dinosaur flesh, and plant matter, and stuff like that. It's just... the organic matter, the living creatures and plant life, of the ages, that's been frozen. It's becoming unfrozen. That means it turns into methane, which is one of the most powerful greenhouse gases. This is a major accelerator of climate change.

So, it means that it's time to stand up. It means that we are out of time. It means it's time to take action, now. So, people are getting out, knowing that our lives are on the line, for all these issues. On account of immigrant deportations, and the attack on women, and all the rest.

DB: Let me just stop you there, because that's the other issue I want to hit. I'm referring to it [the bulk-up of US Border and ICE agents] as Trump's jobs program for ex-military. And I was joking when I said to the audience the other day that, I swear, I know I'm going to open Stars and Stripes, the U.S. Army newspaper, and see major ads.

So I got a call right after the show, from a listener who said, "Are you kidding me? Look at page 9, Stars and Stripes, huge, double page ads, \$10,000 and \$9,000, special courts and expanded private prisons." This is really the cutting edge of, if you will, the new civil rights movement.

If we have a responsibility, it is in terms of the incredible attack on brown people in this country. Undocumented workers who do the hardest work, and, of course, the whole Middle East. Anything darker than John Wayne, and you're in trouble. And we're seeing Sikh, the other day, a Sikh man was assassinated, because he was like Osama Bin Laden, or something.

JS: Yes, you're right. And this is where immigrant rights come together with unbridled militarism. Because this refugee crisis... it's a refugee crisis, it's not an immigration crisis, it's a refugee crisis. We create that crisis through our military policies, not only in the Middle East, but also [by] overturning democracies: Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador. Where we, [...] through our U.S. trained death squads, or through the outright overturning of democracies, we've created this culture of violence that forces people to flee over the border. So militarism, economic exploitation, and the role of NAFTA, which was awful for workers here, as well as farmers south of the border.

These are fixable problems. They can only be fixed together. To my mind, that's

what a political party is. A political party is a coalition that's going to work together around an explicit agenda for people, planet and peace, over profit. The time has come. We have to stand up, like our lives depend on it, because they do.

And, now, this is sort of the silver lining behind this awful scary thunder cloud here that has just descended all over us: That our lives are on the line, so we gotta stand up and do it, in the way that we did under Richard Nixon. And then we impeached him. Trump's days are numbered.

We just saw the president of South Korea impeached, today, upheld by the courts. Why did this happen? In part it was millions of people getting out into the street. It happened in Guatemala, two years ago. In East Germany, Chris Hedges tells the story, he was there as an investigative reporter. And the democracy advocates were meeting and saying "How are we going to get rid of this awful, authoritarian government?" And they said "Maybe in ten years." The next week the wall came down, because people came out.

We've just... we're at the breaking point, and we're also at the wake up point, right now. And so, this is going to accelerate resistance. We're not only creating sanctuary communities, but we're actually now building sanctuary institutions, where people will be kept safe, where the ICE agents can't even go. And, there are other plans that may be in the works with some indigenous tribes, and the role that they can play. Because they are essentially independent nations.

So, there are very exciting things here. In the same way that the Muslim community stood up for the Jewish community and raised money in the face of these anti-Semitic attacks, and all the bomb threats that are going on. We're seeing these wonderful, just life-affirming, humanity-affirming alliances. And, as we wake up to the fact that our days are numbered right now, and that it is in our hands. It's only us, we are the ones we've been waiting for. The time has come, enough of the lesser evil. It's time to stand up, and fight for the greater good.

And even this issue of spoiling elections, and splitting the votes. Well, hello, there's a system called ranked-choice voting which Greens have been promoting forever. The state of Maine just passed it by voter referendum.

[California Governor] Jerry Brown just vetoed it [in California]. There was enabling legislation that was passed by the Legislature and Jerry Brown vetoed it because Democrats are at war with the liberation of our votes. They rely on extortion. They rely on intimidation, and fear, in order to hold people back. Why do they do that? Because they know that they can't earn your vote.

Ranked-choice voting calls their bluff. It allows you to actually rank your choices. If your first choice loses, your vote is automatically reassigned to your second choice. That's a win-win on our democracy. There are win-wins for every issue that faces us.

Right now we're looking at a lose-lose [situation], with this corporate-sponsored duopoly. The Democrats might give us ten more years than the Republicans would, of survival, under Democratic policies. But it's a sinking ship, with the duopoly. It's time to get off the ship. Our lives depend on getting off that ship and launching the lifeboat. We've got it, let's make it happen.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
