Whatever Happened to the Democrats?

by JANNA THOMPSON

In 1972, the year McGovern was chosen as the presidential candidate by the Democratic Party, it seemed as if the progressives, the feminists, the black activists, the young, had at last made the Party their own. Reforms in convention procedure, in the selection of delegates, ensured that more women, more blacks, and more young people attended the national convention than ever before. Issues like abortion, homosexual law reform, were debated in public for the first time. The power of the political bosses appeared to be broken, and Mayor Daley was forced off the convention floor. And finally, a candidate was nominated who, whatever his shortcomings, was firmly opposed to the Vietnam War.

Now, four years later, a "counter-revolution" seems to have taken place. At the party convention, the percentages of women and blacks among the delegates were less than in 1972, and rules of procedure were adopted which made inequalities in state delegations difficult to challenge. In '72, the South Carolina delegation was repeatedly challenged because only 25 per cent of its delegates were women. In '76 only 9 per cent were women, but the delegation was not challenged at all. Further, the party refused to make a serious commitment to the goal sought by feminists, a 50 per cent representation of women in each delegation. The party will "encourage each state to initiate an affirmative action plan" but neither goal nor time limit is specified.

In spite of the serious problems in the US political and economic system, there was no attempt to discuss these pressing issues at the convention. A move by the New Democratic Coalition, a group of progressives including Michael Harrington, Tom Hayden, Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, Ron Dellums, I.F. Stone, to set aside time for such a debate was squashed by the Carter contingent. Some controversial issues could not be avoided. Against the wishes of Carter, who wanted to avoid the subject altogether, a pro-abortion plank was put into the party's platform (mainly through the efforts of the feminists).

Carter did his best to muffle the effect by declaring his personal opposition to abortion
and by suggesting that he would veto attempts to provide federal money to abortion clinics.

The political bosses were back. Mayor Daley's round face beamed from his stronghold in the Illinois delegation, and George Wallace, the outlaw, sat on the same platform as McGovern. Carter, the advocate of a Baptist form of Christianity, seemed to be bent on fulfilling that Biblical prophecy concerning lions and lambs.

Out of this mindlessness came a candidate who managed to achieve a high level of vagueness and ambiguity. Liberals did their best to interpret Carter's muddy speeches as commitments to social justice, while southern conservatives were reading him as a defender of the status quo.

It would be wrong to regard the Democratic National Convention as a total defeat for progressive forces. Though there was less enthusiasm for party reform this year, significant gains were made by those who want to make the party more open and democratic. The unit rule, which permits delegations to ignore minority preferences by voting as a bloc, was repealed against Carter's wishes. This change can be seen as an important contribution to democratic reform, for the unit rule has always been used as a weapon by political bosses like Daley. Feminists also made gains: in particular, they managed to win a commitment from Carter to remake the Women's Committee, formerly a women's auxiliary to the National Committee, into an independent organisation reflecting feminist views. This means that feminists will have more of a chance to affect the day-to-day operation of the party.

It would also be a mistake to be overly impressed by the appearance of unity which the party managed to achieve in front of the television cameras. Beyond the range of the cameras, disagreements took place, demands were made, compromises were hammered out. The unity Carter sought could only be achieved by paying attention to what feminists, blacks, labor leaders wanted.

But these positive features can't disguise the fact that for progressive forces the convention was a big step backwards. In 1972 it seemed possible that a new alliance could be forged between radicals, left liberals, progressive labor, feminists, blacks, poor people and other disadvantaged minorities: possible that progressives might be able to use their party's platform to debate in public radical alternatives to present policies. In 1976, the chance of building a new Democratic Party seems much more remote.

The difference between the Democrats of '72 and the Democrats of '76 is usually attributed to the severe defeat in the '72 election - a defeat which taught the party (according to the political commentators) that Americans were more conservative than expected. Watergate and other scandals (so the story goes) have accelerated this rightward movement. According to a much quoted public opinion poll, about 50 per cent of Americans regard themselves as conservatives.

This is one point of view. On the other hand, the members of the New Democratic Coalition, left wing mayors, radical state legislators and congress people who have been elected to office in recent years, generally on a Democratic ticket, claim that Americans were more willing to challenge orthodox ideas and traditional ways of doing things than ever before. How can so many people call themselves conservative and at the same time be open to radical ideas?

When you begin talking to people it soon becomes clear that the terms used to describe political positions have unexpected meanings. When people describe themselves as conservative, they are generally registering a distrust or opposition to bureaucracies in government, labor unions and businesses; often a distaste for scandals and corruption which have come to be associated with these bureaucracies; sometimes a feeling of impotence and anger in the face of worsening conditions, almost always an opposition to liberalism and socialism. Liberals (to most people) are people in favor of more government control; socialists want total government control; and who, after Watergate, would be enough of a fool to trust a government?

The ultra-conservatives, who talk about the need for decency, morality and curbing federal power, feel that their historical moment has arrived. It is these reactionaries, not the left, who are this year talking about forging a great new majority, and considering leaving their party to form an organisation of their own. The fact that the heroes of the right,
Ronald Reagan and John Connally, are financed by agribusiness and oil corporations is one of those contradictions of right wing politics papered over by talk about free enterprise and individual liberty.

Why hasn't the Democratic Party, the party of social reform, been able to expose the right and take advantage of widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo? Some of the reasons for this failure to meet the challenge of the right are found in the nature of the Democratic Party and its present predicament.

The Democratic Party is not, and never was, a social democratic party or an American equivalent of the Australian and British labor parties. The Socialist Party, which flourished from 1900-1919 might have become such a party, but it was too young and weak to survive the post World War I reaction and a communist breakaway. The Democratic Party at the time of the rise and decline of the Socialist Party was a disintegrating alliance of midwest farmers, Southern whites, and some groups of urban immigrants. The fortunes of the party were revived by the Depression and the long reign of Franklin Roosevelt, who made the Democratic Party into a new coalition consisting of progressive business people, trade unions, the poor - especially of the cities, minorities, the educated urban middle class, populist farmers, and the traditional Democrats of the South. The basis of this alliance, and of the New Deal itself, was the belief that capitalism can be made to work to the advantage of almost everyone, providing economic growth is maintained by government controls and an expansionist foreign policy, and providing the distress and damage caused by the system is alleviated by government-financed programs. Liberals have traditionally argued for more government intervention - particularly to remedy obvious social injustice; Conservatives of the party want handouts for businesses and farms, but not for the unemployed or the poor.

The Democratic Party is the party of welfare state capitalism in the US, but the commitment to welfare has always been shaky. The relative strength of conservative forces - Southern Democrats and big business (which contributes most of the party funds) - has ensured that programs designed to help the disadvantaged have been kept to a minimum. The Democrats, for all their years of power in the White House and Congress, have done far less to bring about social reforms than the shorter-lived British and Australian labor governments.

There have always been tensions in the Democratic alliance - inherent contradictions between blacks and white Southerners, between workers and employers, between tax payers and those who live on welfare, between farmers and city dwellers. As long as all groups believed that economic expansion could be maintained and everyone would benefit, friction could be kept to a minimum. But now that inflation has become a serious problem, economic growth harder to maintain, foreign economic expansion more problematic, welfare programs more expensive and unemployment more severe, reconciling opposing interests has become a near impossibility.

In spite of internal contradictions the party has not only held together in this form for 44 years, but it has also prospered. Among the electorate, Democrats outnumber Republicans two to one, and Republicans can only win elections if they manage to persuade a considerable number of Democrats to stay home or cross over (in '72, many Democrats simply didn't vote). Some political experts believe that the US is gradually moving towards a one-party political system.

All would be well for the Democrats if their policies were actually working. But it has become clear to most people that they aren't. Lyndon Johnson working in the framework of New Deal strategies tried to please the corporations and stimulate the economy by carrying on the Vietnam War. What he got was inflation and a defeat. He tried to placate the poor by a War on Poverty, but the results fell far short of his aims. No Democrat wants to follow in Johnson's footsteps, but no party leader has a better alternative, and no one wants to risk disturbing the potentially explosive elements of the Democratic alliance - an alliance whose raison d'etre is the preservation and promotion of capitalism in the style of the New Deal.

The result of this predicament is Jimmy Carter, a candidate whose ambiguities are designed to placate the contradictory elements of his party (who for the moment are willing to be placated) and at the same time appear sympathetic to those increasing
numbers who are disenchanted with New Deal capitalism. Carter has to endorse the traditional Democratic orthodoxies which hold the Party together, and at the same time appear to oppose them. He must appear to be hostile towards an establishment which consists mostly of Democrats. This is a difficult trick and one of the interesting spectacles of the coming months will be to see how long Carter can do his balancing act and where he will land when he falls.

People on the left have always had an ambivalent, if not hostile, attitude towards the Democratic Party. In fact, it is much more difficult to be a radical working in this party than in the ALP or the British Labor Party. The Democratic Party does not have any socialist ideals - even as historical leftovers. The Democratic Party, far more than any labor party, is dominated by big business interests and only in a few states, like Michigan, are the views of organized labor significant. The party contains some of the most reactionary elements in the country, and the compromises that a radical has to make to remain politically viable are hard to live with. When Tom Hayden lost the Senate primary in California, he felt compelled to endorse the winner, Tunney, a representative of agribusiness and nuclear interests, the very forces Hayden opposed in his campaign.

Can the Democratic Party ever become what it is purported to be - the party of the common person, a party dedicated to democratic reform?

To overhaul the Democratic Party requires two fundamental changes: developing a new political program which opposes, down the line, most of the political beliefs that Democrats have lived off for 44 years, and bringing together a new coalition to support the program. What this amounts to is revolutionary takeover. Not surprisingly, it was not accomplished in 1972, and it is not likely to be achieved by 1980.

There are people in the party who are working for radical change, though their influence is largely confined to their local areas, and their programs are generally confined to single issues. At the convention they were not in the mood to act tough. When Elaine Brown, a Black Panther and a California delegate, called for a walkout, she did not get much support. Most blacks, workers, women, liberals seem to prefer to get a fraction of what they want from a victorious party than risk getting nothing at all.

The success of the party makes it impervious to change. Roosevelt’s forces remade the Democrats in desperate times when the future of the party looked bleak. The Democrats of today may be theoretically bankrupt, but their entrenched majority in Congress and most state legislatures makes self-examination seem unnecessary, even dangerous. Most Democratic leaders seem willing to shed their political philosophy completely, as the party moves rightward to occupy positions abandoned by Republicans in this party’s march to the far right. This development is disturbing to labor, to the poor and the minorities, but there is no other party they can vote for; they are rapidly becoming disenfranchised, as the Southern blacks and poor whites have been for generations.

In the end, the progressives may only get the party they want by starting one of their own. At the moment, a split isn’t on the cards: progressives are still demoralised by the McGovern defeat of ’72; they lack unity, and without effective radical movements they have no one to back them up. But the Democratic Party is a volatile organisation, and the economic and political situation is unstable. The conditions for remaking or breaking the Democratic Party may come sooner than anyone expects.