

No Longer Beating Around Bush

Pragmatism rules in the Democrats' quest to topple the President, writes Anne Summers

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Just as the ALP seems as if it is ready to bury all differences and unite behind their new leader to ensure the defeat of John Howard in the next federal elections, so US Democrats appear to be displaying an unprecedented level of pragmatism in their quest to select a presidential candidate who can beat George W. Bush in November.

The kind of people, self-styled progressives, who lined up behind Ralph Nader in 2000 and cost Al Gore the Presidency are uniting in a call for domestic "regime change". "The result is a new strain of pragmatism and an unusual moment in American politics," wrote former Nader supporter Don Hazen, last week on the left-wing online news service Altnet (www.altnet.org) of which he is executive editor. "Voters are seeking not the most passionate or progressive, or moderate or anti-war candidate, but rather the one who is most electable, who can stand up to the bullying, the war-mongering, the tax cuts for the wealthy, and the scare tactics that dominate the Bush administration".

The movement – if you can call it that – is known as ABBA: Anybody But Bush Again. Hazen claims that an analysis of voting in the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary underscores that electability reigns supreme as the chief overriding issue for many Democratic and independent voters. This sentiment is echoed by Molly Ivins, a Texan journalist with a long career of dissecting the political flaws in father and son Bush. "Democrats, in an unusual fit of unity," she wrote in a column last week that was picked up by Altnet, "are trying to find someone who can beat George W. Bush, period. Our usual inability to support anyone who isn't perfect on every single issue dear to our hearts is subsumed by the profound sense that this country is not just headed in the wrong direction, but literally coming apart. Electability is the primo consideration."

This is a far cry from 2000 when Ivins advocated a protest vote for Nader in states where the outcome was certain. No one is arguing for even mild risk-taking in 2004.

Does this new sense of unity signal that Senator John Kerry, the winner of both primaries held so far, will be elected the Party's candidate at the Democratic national Convention in Boston in July? Not necessarily but the odds have to weigh heavily in his favour.

Tomorrow's seven primaries (in South Carolina, Arizona, Delaware, Missouri, New Mexico, North Dakota and Oklahoma) are likely to muddy the waters. It is extremely unlikely that Kerry will pick up all of these (Senator John Edwards will probably win South Carolina and General Wesley Clark is predicted to win Oklahoma). Kerry is predicted to win Missouri, Arizona and North Dakota and if he does will pick up another handy 170 plus delegates. But it is the outcome of next month's ten

Super Tuesday primaries – including the delegate rich states of California and New York – that will determine who will win the nomination.

Kerry's trouncing of front-runner Howard Dean in Iowa and New Hampshire has surprised everyone except perhaps the people who voted for him. The media had deemed the Dean bandwagon all but unstoppable. Fuelled by unprecedentedly successful Internet fundraising, and grass roots activism of a kind not seen since George McGovern ran in 1972, "the Deanies" seemed to be breaking all the rules and forging a new kind of politics.

His coming third in Iowa devastated Dean and his crowd and when he used That Scream to demonstrate how he felt, you could almost hear shudders of revulsion all across New Hampshire. Let's vote for the sane one, voters seemed to say.

In fact, Dean's numbers had begun to evaporate long before. The current issue of *GQ* has an illuminating profile of Joe Trippi whom Dean replaced as campaign manager after New Hampshire. Lisa DePaulo, the writer of "Joe Trippi's Wild Ride" (see <http://us/gq/com/plus/>) reports that Dean's pollster had told them before the political barn-dance began in Iowa that it was all over.

And this was before it was revealed, by the *New York Times* last week, that the Dean campaign is virtually broke, with less than \$5 million in the kitty, and campaign staff being asked to work free for the next two weeks. The record \$40 million Dean raised has all been spent on TV advertising across America it seems, with Trippi's consulting company placing the ads and collecting a 15 per cent commission. (Trippi received no salary but this deal means that financially he would have been incomparably better off as well having an incentive to overspend on mainstream television. So much for new politics!)

It's only on *The West Wing* that former governors from places like New Hampshire or Vermont can become president and voters know that. The surge to Kerry represents the judgement that this is the guy who has the best chance of beating Bush.

Kerry has a stellar Vietnam war record, a liberal-enough voting record on key issues to bring the Naderites and other former sceptics into the tent, and he's been a Senator for twenty years.

When he says "We're coming. You're going. And don't let the door hit you on the way out" to Big Oil, Big Drugs and other special interests who, says Kerry, "call the White House their home" he does so with the conviction of an insider, someone who perhaps can make it happen.

There is considerable panic among Democrats today about being totally locked out of Washington. They currently have no power. At least Clinton had majorities in both House and Senate when he won office in 1992. A Democrat President this time would have to hit the ground running. No room for the embarrassing inexperience of the Carter days or even the early Clinton White House. A Washington person, with Kerry's political track record maybe just what the country will go for. It does not hurt, either, that he comes from Massachusetts, the state that delivered the last Democratic president to be elected from the North.

He has problems of course. The main one perhaps being that, as Molly Ivins puts it, he has “no Elvis”. Bush has enough Elvis to get by and, of course, Bill Clinton had it in spades. Kerry is a wooden, clumsy campaigner with little charm and no charisma. Can this be overcome? A lot of people are hoping so.

Where will Bill Clinton throw his support? Unlike Gore who jumped in early to endorse Dean, Clinton is husbanding his endorsement. His political instincts are second to none and he has so far not showed his hand. Nor has the junior Senator from New York who has to include in her calculations what a Kerry victory would do to her chances in 2008. Bill and Hillary won't determine the candidate but they will probably help shape the decision. They, like the rest of the Democratic Party and an increasing number of Americans, believe another four years of Bush would be bad for the US and catastrophic for the world.

Whoever leads the Democrats in November will carry an unusually heavy load of party as well as voter expectations. All those progressives who have jettisoned their principles to pump for pragmatism will be looking for a win. Signs are they will do whatever it takes to topple Bush.

Will a similar outbreak of pragmatism attach itself to those former Labor supporters who protest-voted Green in 2001? Will they also hold their noses on issues such as refugee policy and decide that ousting Howard is the number one priority? My bet is: yes, they will.

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