

**“It’s like a kind of psychological trauma that is happening in our society.”**

**An Interview with Peter Camejo. Vice Presidential Candidate on the Ralph Nader/Peter Camejo 2004 ticket in the United States Presidential Elections.**

Ernest Tate, on behalf of Relay, interviews Peter Camejo, who speaks about the various left groups who are cooperating in support of his campaign and about some of the internal difficulties in the Green Party. Ernest Tate has known Camejo since the late 1950’s when Peter was a leader of the Young Socialists Alliance and a leader of the American Socialist Workers’ Party. In the 1960s, Peter gained national prominence because of his work against the Vietnam War at the beginning of a profound youth radicalization which later swept America and Canada. He is now a leader of the Green Party in California and has emerged as a major figure on the American left. He ran in the last state election for governor in which Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected. He is on the Ralph Nader ticket as Vice Presidential candidate in the coming November elections.

**Ernest Tate: This morning’s National Post says Ralph Nader has been ruled off the ballot in Florida. In your “Avocado Declaration”,\* you predicted these kinds of tactics being used against you.**

**Peter Camejo:** Well, in the case of Florida, it’s a judge who has simply taken it upon himself to declare that the Reform Party is not legitimate. This is unheard of. It’s really untenable. In other words, even if a party has ballot status, they can just rule it off. This has never happened before to a party that has ballot status. So we’re appealing the decision in the court system. The Reform Party’s national convention came out against the war in Iraq and against the Patriot Act - for these reasons they’ve endorsed Ralph Nader. Once a large party, but now not so large, it still has ballot status in six states. The authorities in other states have accepted that the Reform Party does exist.

**Tate: Why are you on the Nader ticket?**

**Camejo:** Ralph Nader is the one voice in the United States saying that it’s wrong to vote for the war, for the Patriot Act, to vote for candidates who have opposed the labour movement and the environment. Bush and Kerry, agree with each other on all the major issues. Kerry’s posture in this campaign is about how to best implement Bush’s policies. We don’t agree with that. We believe what Bush has been doing is wrong. We believe you have a free election when people can hear different platforms and can vote for them.

The Democrats have a candidate in Kerry who gave Bush eighteen standing ovations, on one day in January. It’s very peculiar to have a candidate who so admires this President that he gave him eighteen standing ovations, and is now running against that President as a candidate. That’s what we now have. Kerry voted for everything Bush

\*[www.avocadoeducationproject.org/pdf](http://www.avocadoeducationproject.org/pdf)

asked him to vote for, even stating he agrees with Bush on his policies on education, the environment, labour, the war, the Patriot Act - on every issue.

Kerry is calling for lowering taxes on the corporations, who now are paying the lowest tax rates ever in their history, while they have the largest profit margins ever. Nader is the one voice that has stood up against all this, so I was very happy to join him as Vice-Presidential candidate.

**Tate: I'm sure our readers would like to know how you address the charge from the Kerry camp that a vote for Nader is a vote for Bush?**

**Camejo:** We think a vote for Kerry is a vote for Bush; a vote for Bush is a vote for Bush, so we think it's really Bush versus Nader. The only reason we are saying this is because in America, like in Canada, we have a "first past the post" system, and therefore, the will of the electorate is manipulated because people don't feel free to vote for whom they want. In fact, the most amazing thing about this campaign is that the overwhelming majority of those who will vote for Kerry do not agree with Kerry.

It is very peculiar to have an election in which a candidate expects to win by getting people to vote for him who do not approve of what he stands for. The "first past the post" system is the reason.

In reality, Kerry is stealing all of Nader's votes. There are people who are voting for Kerry but who agree with Nader and should be voting for Nader. If the Democrats really believed in free elections, they would long ago have proposed that we have a system that avoids such a situation or have a system that allows proportional representation, so that if a political party gets 20% of the vote, they get 20% of the seats. But the Democrats are opposed to democracy, they oppose free elections, they want to give the impression of an election without actually allowing one.

The most important thing about elections is that the various points of view that exist in society should be represented. The Democrats very much oppose this and are doing everything they can to prevent this from being a free election.

They don't want Nader to be on the ballot. They don't want the people to be free to vote against the war and against the Patriot Act in defense of the constitution of the United States. They prefer to limit the election to two individuals who are fighting over implementing the same platform.

**Tate: How is the issue of Iraq affecting the election?**

**Camejo:** That's the main issue of the campaign. There are polls that indicate about half the population of the United States are opposed to the war - that is about half agreeing with the overwhelming majority of the world. Only the Nader ticket advances this position. It is amazing to watch how these two corporate-backed parties, the parties backed by big money, do not respect the will, not only of the people of the world, but of the American people. They don't want the overwhelming majority of humanity to be

allowed into the debate. This is the central issue of the campaign. It's the central issue we present and our support, which is in the millions of people, comes primarily from those people who say, "No matter what, I just cannot vote for a candidate who's for war."

Our support right now primarily comes from among young people, from among Arab Americans, from Muslims, of which there are 7 million in the United States, all who really see the importance of the issue, and who see that Nader alone stands for the views of the overwhelming majority of people in the world.

**Tate: Are you getting much support from the anti-war movement?**

**Camejo:** There was a march recently, of half a million people in New York in which I participated; all were against the war and against Bush. The amazing thing to me is that these people, while they're against the war, plan in their majority to vote for war. On the march you could tell the depth of their confusion and their guilt over this, because they weren't carrying signs in support of their candidate, who is John Kerry.

The whole march was almost completely empty of election signs. On the whole march, I only saw one, a woman was carrying a sign that said she was for Kerry. I walked over to her and suggested that perhaps she was at the wrong demonstration, because this was an anti-war demonstration and yet she was carrying a pro-war sign. It's a contradiction some anti-war activists have. They feel they've become victims, they're trapped, and they're like prisoners of a political system that's designed to imprison them and to prevent them from ever being able to vote for what they truly believe in.

**Tate: What is the Nader/Camejo ticket saying about the "Star Wars" missile defense system?**

**Camejo:** We're completely opposed to it. We think it's a total waste of money. It's not defending America from anybody, or anybody from anything. Once again, it's a promotion of the military industrial complex, designed to give Americans the impression that there is some kind of gigantic danger to them somewhere and that this system is somehow going to protect them. We just don't agree with that.

We think the problems American citizens face from terrorism are due to a continuing crisis, in terms of relationship, between the United States and the Arab and Muslim world, with a great amount of antagonism and hostility to the United States. But that's generic.

Right now the entire world is hostile to the United States and its policies. We're seeing more and more individuals who may be determined to act against the United States and against individual Americans. The American people are more and more in danger from the policies of their own government, which in violation of international law, occupies and invades other countries.

The fact is the United States supported Saddam Hussein and supported Osama Bin Laden. This is their policy coming back to haunt them from the past. They promoted

terrorism and promoted terrorist organizations that now have become anti-American and are using the very methods the United States military trained them to carry out. But terrorism is always wrong, no matter who is using it for whatever ends.

The United States, in order to defend itself against this danger, needs to change its social, economic and political policies towards the Middle East, and become supportive of democracy in the Middle East, instead of continuing to support totalitarian regimes such as the one it has installed in Iraq by military occupation and those that exist in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Jordan, etc. All these dictatorships are supported by the United States.

**Tate: An issue that concerns Canadians is NAFTA. What's the ticket saying about it?**

**Camejo:** We're opposed to NAFTA and the World Trade Organization. We regard these as governmental organizations whose leaderships are not elected by anybody, but which are created by the corporate world to make decisions on the environment, labour, the promotion of capital, all kinds of decisions about trade, which governments then implement. We think that this is wrong.

All these organizations are set up to provide cheap labour throughout the third world for the major corporations, to lower environmental standards and to permit the continuing destruction of world's ecological system.

**Tate: What's happening with the abortion issue ?**

**Camejo:** We're pro-choice. We're for full rights for women on all issues. Kerry tends to be for this also and the Democrats generally agree with us on this and are both in opposition to the Republicans. On this issue, there is a difference between the Democrats and the Republicans. If the Democrats were exactly the same as the Republicans, they would be useless to the Republicans.

The way the Republicans look at the Democrats, it's the Democrats job to prevent any serious opposition developing to them. They want an organization that appears to be different, and which can co-opt any opposition which may appear, such as on the war or other issues.

Some issues like the rights of women and the abortion issue are used as a peg, for example, essentially as to who's going to be nominated for the Supreme Court. This becomes a reason for everyone to write off all major issues and announce that because the Democrats and Republicans are in agreement on one or two things that they will therefore vote for them.

I think the issues around women have enormous validity but deep down we still see the Democratic Party's failure to do a whole series of things that are important to the overwhelming majority of women, such as raising the minimum wage. Many women

suffer the consequences of a declining minimum wage that has dropped almost 40% in the last four years.

These are issues that are important for women, like issue of choice, which we stand for and defend, as opposed to the Democrats and Republicans.

**Tate: Are you getting much black support?**

**Camejo:** When I ran for governor in California against Arnold Schwarzenegger, percentage-wise my largest vote was among African-Americans. Second highest was among Latinos. Both African Americans and Latinos voted 2:1 percentage-wise for me, compared to European-Americans.

The Green Party in California has become a party whose mass base is now in the youth, among working people, the poorest people in California and people of colour. In the case of the Presidential race, Nader may be the only candidate whose votes come from a majority of people of colour, because between the Latinos, African-Americans and especially the Arab American community, we're at about 26% in the polls.

This may be the first time a majority of non-whites have voted for a presidential candidate. In truth, I think many organizations – such as the Latino and African-Americans, – are very much controlled by the Democratic Party, just as it controls the unions, the not-for-profit organizations and the NGO's. The Democratic Party has a strangle hold on these. Many people have become their prisoners.

What we've noticed recently is the beginning of a rebellion against this. In California, the president of MAPA, the Mexican-American Political Association, the traditional organization of the Mexican-American people, recently, publicly left the Democratic Party and joined the Green Party – in a public registration, which he did at the Secretary of State's office.

We've had leaders in the African-American community, and other Latinos, who are beginning to change and leave the Democratic Party. But this is all at a very early stage.

**Tate: What's happening with organized labour? Is it continuing to support the Democrats?**

**Camejo:** Organized labour, a long time ago, accepted a strategy to work with and to support the Democrats politically. The end result is that trade-unions have declined from 37% of the population to under 12%, and play a diminishing role in American society.

Labour is unable to grow, unable to organize - the laws and the policies of the government prevent it. This situation has been brought about by the two-party system, especially by the Democrats and is a result of the union leaders' failure to break with them.

These union leaders take the dues from their memberships and without consulting them, give tens of millions of dollars to the Democratic Party. This relationship is like a revolving door with positions and appointments given out, etc., where the leadership of the unions and the Democratic Party politicians are both in a game of corruption.

They are tied together and in return for better union support for the corporate world, labour and working people in America are left without any real political representation and without any real defense of their interests.

**Tate: During the last presidential campaign when Nader was a candidate, some hoped that a permanent organization would come out of it. Are there any beginnings of a class alternative to the Democrats and Republicans emerging after this election?**

**Camejo:** After the election in 2000, Ralph Nader worked very hard to build the Green Party. He did forty-one different events, engaging in fundraising and recruiting to the Green Party. His campaign led to the very rapid growth of the Green Party and the election of over 200 people throughout the country and now 1,000 candidates running for office.

In the 2004 election, we in the Green Party decided to become part of a broader coalition and Green Party members are the largest number of people backing Ralph Nader. He also has the support of many independents, some people who have come out of the Democratic and Republican parties including elements of the Reform Party. It's a broader campaign than in 2000, even though the ticket may get fewer votes. It reaches out to other forces because people are starting to rebel, especially around the issue of the Patriot Act, the deficit in the government and the war.

This is all beginning to create a break and an interest in alternatives. In the Green Party a peculiar event took place, where, even though the primary showed an enormous victory for Ralph Nader, one candidate who opposed Ralph Nader, who only got 12.2% of the vote in the primary and who also lost in all the major state conventions, nevertheless was able to pack the Green Party convention and win by a small margin. This has created a big crisis.

The Green Party is now very divided, but it is still the dominant third party. It continues to grow and the overwhelming majority of the members support Nader. A caucus called, "Greens for Democracy and Independence", is being formed inside the party, demanding democracy, for internal elections to be upheld, respect for majority vote and the will of the membership. On the issue of independence, the demand is that the party must remain completely independent of the Democratic Party.

There's no question that Democrats were influencing the convention and trying to get the Green Party to vote for Kerry and run a candidate that would not oppose Kerry, which is what has happened. There's now a big division in the Green Party with the majority supporting Nader and a minority which is supporting a person who has a strategy they call "faith based", where they call for a vote for the Democrats in certain states.

**Tate: Was that primarily in California?**

**Camejo:** At the Nader-Camejo opening rally in California, where the Green Party is the strongest, we had 1,000 of our supporters there from the Bay area. David Cobb, who is the official candidate of the Green Party, held a meeting where only thirty-five people attended, in an area where we have 40,000 members. Only thirty-five people showed up for his campaign meeting!

Virtually no one supports David Cobb. Only a handful, primarily individuals, are backing him and in reality they are backing Kerry. In this sense, their whole campaign is a farce. It's a tragedy that it's happening inside the Green Party, as it will cost the Green Party very heavily, probably in terms of losing members and having to battle this out.

There is, however, among the periphery of the Green Party, people who are loosely connected, a lot of people who are influenced by pressure from the Democrats to vote for Kerry. This has become the basis of the Cobb current in the Green Party. There is a real clear left-right division, with the majority of the party being with the left and supporting Nader, and because of the impact of the Democrat Party, a growing minority supporting Cobb.

The Democrats don't hide this. All the Democratic Party influenced press congratulated the Greens when they voted against Nader in the convention and supported a pro-Kerry person.

**Tate: The Green Party in Ontario is quite conservative. But it seems to me the Green Party in the United States is different. Is this so?**

**Camejo:** The Green Party in most countries of the world embraces an ecological programme around the crisis of global warming and other issues concerning the environment. It tries to get all the political parties to adopt platforms on these issues. It tries to make society aware of these issues. In that sense, the Greens play a positive role.

On other issues the Greens may support all kinds of different platforms, and are not necessarily for social justice, for improving democracy or other issues. But in America there is neither a labour party, nor a left party or socialist party. There have never been in the last fifty years, almost one hundred years, any large forces that are politically independent from the corporate world, therefore the appearance of the Green Party immediately takes on a different colouration.

The Green Party in America is not a party only organized around environmental or ecological issues. It is the beginning in America of an alternative party that challenges especially, the anti-labour, anti-discriminatory, racist policies, and international policies, etc., of the two major pro-corporate parties. So the Green Party is not a typical Green Party at all.

**Tate: What is the attitude of the various left groups to the Nader-Camejo campaign?**

**Camejo:** The small groups that call themselves leftists or socialists are still much divided. The International Socialist Organization now is the strongest in America, has the most young people in it and is the most active. They're working very hard to support the Nader-Camejo campaign and are very effective in their support. They have a lot of influence on the campuses and they're been very helpful. They also have people in the labour movement.

There's another group, Solidarity, which is doing a lot of work in the labour movement. They are very supportive and have been in the Green Party for a long time, and have been very helpful. Regarding the remnants of the Stalinist currents, the Communist Party and Maoist group, they're all pro-Democratic Party. They've always been for the pro-corporate party.

Other people who are considered leftists, or independents, are around Global Exchange. They're supporting Kerry. All of these organizations that are dependant on funding from liberals or liberal Democrats, fear they will be crushed financially. It's very difficult to maintain an organization like Global Exchange and not be pro-Democratic Party because the Democrats can cut you off.

That's how the Democrats function and the not-for-profit and environmental groups, to avoid being destroyed financially, simply go along with them. So we have some organizations like that, which are supporting Kerry, and not Ralph Nader. But as for those who are in the socialist currents, which are very small, there is a division between those who have come from a Stalinist background or the historically conservative, social democratic backgrounds, and others.

But what is of interest is we're seeing more and more people, unlike anything since the sixties when there was a massive radical shift by Americans, breaking with the Democratic and Republican parties. Twenty-five percent of the American people are no longer registered Democrats, or Republicans. That's the highest it's ever been in the history of the United States.

**Tate: There seems to be more hostility in this election season than in the last one on top of the chronic problem of voter apathy. What's the explanation for this?**

**Camejo:** This is partly due to a shift in the policies of the United States government in the last four years. The reason the government gives is the 9/11 terrorist attack on the United States, but I think the real reason is we're reaching a peak in oil consumption, and control of the Middle East is essential for all the advanced industrial countries. Their economies need all the oil they can get.

The United States has the largest military and it has made the decision to arbitrarily violate all international laws to get control of the oil. This change in policy has been very

scary to a lot of progressives and liberals who have always depended on the Democratic Party for leadership and they've watched that party giving standing ovations in support of this policy and they see the Democrats voting for the Patriot Act, which takes away our constitutional rights, they see them voting for the war against Iraq.

It puts progressive and liberals in a state of shock and they just think to themselves that the only reason the Democrats are doing this is so they can get elected. That's an extremely peculiar phenomenon. We have tens of millions of people who will vote for Kerry, hoping he's lying about what he himself believes.

It's like a kind of psychological trauma that is happening in our society. Of all those people who agree with Ralph Nader, the majority are going to vote for John Kerry and the people who agree with Kerry, are going to vote for Bush. And the people who actually agree with Bush and are voting for Bush, really need psychiatric help because with his positions on everything and what he's doing, he's also disconnected from reality.

**Tate: Can some kind of "left" convergence take place around your campaign, and continue after this election?**

**Camejo:** There has certainly been a development of groups working together in our campaign, but I don't see a left convergence taking place in the United States at this stage. How things will proceed in the next period is very unclear.

The Green Party has a membership in the order about half a million people. It is increasingly becoming a big centre of progressive activity, but only electorally. The Green Party is not very active at other levels.

The anti-war demonstrations are organized by people who are mainly outside our organization. The Green's support the demonstrations, but doesn't take the leadership of them. The Green Party is a rainbow of opinions about a lot of issues that have come together within a single organization. There's been a recent shift in the approach of other progressive and left organizations, but until now they have not become members of the Green Party. That's now beginning to happen. They're following what Solidarity did in joining us. I think others will too. But I think there's some feeling among progressives that the Green Party has too many internal problems and difficulties and that it may not be the instrument that they think can be most effective in making social change.

At this stage I'm urging everyone to join the Green Party and help us fight to keep it independent of the Democrats and to democratize its internal structure and deepen its involvement in the community, for example, in the unions. We have tens of thousands of members in California's unions, but we have yet to organize them. We have been trying to organize caucuses in the unions and this, I think, is how the next period could go if more forces keep joining.

We are making headway among Latinos, especially in California. We feel it's possible we could become an arena in which different progressive groups begin to work

together to build an alternative force against those who favour the government's policies towards labour.

Ninety percent of our people, in the last few years, have made no financial gain when you make adjustments for inflation, in a period in which the GDP of the United States has risen more than ever in its history. At this moment, profit margins are now the largest ever in the history of the United States. Corporations are now paying the lowest tax rate they've ever paid. They once paid 33% of all our taxes; now they're only paying 7.8%. Meanwhile the minimum wage has dropped from \$8.15 to \$5.15, adjusted for inflation.

But there are changes happening where the Green Party has had influence. In one city, because we elected a person to one position, we were able to have the minimum wage raised to \$10.50, and in another to \$8.50.

We have also succeeded in giving the right to undocumented workers to vote, a democratic right that's now on the ballot because of the influence of the Green Party in San Francisco. We can see the beginnings of an alternative political force emerging, and it would be good to have all those who are doing work in other areas to come into the Green Party and work together.

But there is no unanimity on this. For example, we have a party in California called the Peace and Freedom Party which has about 70,000 registered members. While we're starting to work together –in my campaign I'm welcoming one of their candidates to speak with me at all my meetings – we have yet to bring our two forces together.

The Green Party has 160,000 members in California and the Peace and Freedom Party has 70,000. Therefore, there are about a quarter of a million people in California who have clearly broken from the Democratic and Republican Parties. That lays the basis for the beginning of a movement that will fight for social justice.

September 8th, 2004.

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