

DR. MITAU is professor of political science and cochairman of his department in Macalester College at St. Paul. He is actively interested in state politics, and he is thus especially well qualified to write about Minnesota's recent political history.

The Democratic-Farmer-Labor PARTY SCHISM of 1948

G. THEODORE MITAU

BEHIND the lively events of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party schism of 1948 a long and complex background of political protest can be traced. As one writer has put it, Minnesota "through most of its history has shown symptoms of political schizophrenia. On the one hand, it was the staid dowager, as reliably Republican as its down-East Yankee sisters; on the other, it had skitish moments during which it produced a brood of third parties or helped raise the radical offspring of its neighbors."¹ Especially in periods of economic depression, voices of agrarian and urban protest, often discordant and intense, have risen from the mining pits of the Mesabi Range, from the slaughterhouses and railroad shops of the cities, and from the debt-ridden farms of the Red River Valley to find expression in the platforms and conventions of Minnesota's third and minor parties. Through the Anti-Monopolists and the Greenback party of the 1870s, and the Nonpartisan League and the Farmer-Labor party of the present century, this tradition of protest has continued to exert pressure on state politics.

¹ Donald F. Warner, "Prelude to Populism," in *Minnesota History*, 32:129 (September, 1951).

Thus the fervor for social justice and economic opportunity has long had organizational expression in Minnesota, even though success in national elections has been rare and erratic. Along with other Midwestern states, Minnesota witnessed the well-known patterns of protest, genuinely active, rich in condemnation of the railroads, monopolies, and Wall Street, and proud of the righteous blasts from such "tribunes of the people" as Ignatius Donnelly, A. C. Townley, Magnus Johnson, and Floyd B. Olson. The quest for success at the polls, which would translate platform and program into actual public policy, caused leaders of the Populist movement to experiment with various types of political tactics. At times it led them to support a major party contestant, such as John A. Johnson, who ran for governor on the Democratic ticket in 1904, and Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr., candidate for the Republican nomination for governor in the primaries of 1918; at other times it led them to advocate fusion with emerging national parties, as in 1912 and 1924; and in other campaigns, like that of 1892, all fusion attempts were spurned and Donnelly was called upon to head a state Populist ticket as that party's candi-

date for governor. During the dark, unhappy days of the depression in the 1930s the voices of protest rose to a crescendo. In their commitment to left-wing radicalism, the Farmer-Labor platforms of that period are perhaps unmatched by those of any other American party which has been successful at the polls.² Those were, of course, bitter times, and the remedies proposed by the Farmer-Labor administration and party leaders were sharp and dogmatic curatives for deeply felt economic ills, offering many a strange combination of Marxism, agrarian egalitarianism, and Utopianism.

But even in the perilous 1930s, when the party had the popular Governor Olson to argue on its behalf, Farmer-Labor policies seemed to have reached the limits of their acceptability. Olson's legislative program encountered major modification, some features incurring intense hostility and some meeting with outright defeat. This happened, moreover, in sessions like those of 1933 and 1937, when Olson's party had control of the lower house of the legislature. Then in 1938 the electoral fortunes of Farmer-Labor protest reached a new low. Governor Elmer Benson was swept out of office by Harold Stassen, the relatively unknown county attorney from South St. Paul, after a campaign which stressed charges of administrative incompetence, corruption, and blindness to Communist infiltration. The wave of popular indignation left Benson with a mere 387,263 votes to the amazing and overwhelming total of 678,839 for the Republican party's nominee.³

The Farmer-Labor party lost its one-time broad popular support, according to one scholar, largely because it could not combat the undermining tactics used by internal quarreling factions, and because it failed to provide necessary policy direction through executive and legislative leadership. The same writer concludes his analysis of the "great debacle of 1938" with the observation that "the next six years were to see the final disintegration of the Farmer-Labor party, culminating in its virtual

extinction when it was fused with the Democratic party in the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party"; and he describes "the fusion of 1944" as "simply the requiem for a death that had occurred in 1938."⁴

WHAT, in retrospect, can be inferred from these events? Minnesota's eleven electoral votes never have and probably never will determine the balance of presidential fortunes. Nevertheless, traditions of protest politics make Minnesota a most fascinating laboratory for the study of political dynamics of agrarian and labor discontent. Most populist movements have been motivated by an urge to broaden the base of socio-political and economic privilege through such state interventions as a particular grievance seemed to demand. What these movements lacked in the doctrinaire qualities of a European pattern of challenge was counterbalanced by the American tradition of practical and selective state intervention.⁵

Most of this protest, then, was genuine, necessary, creative. Especially relevant in a study of the fortunes of the protest tradition after the Democratic-Farmer-Labor fusion of 1944, however, is the fact that some of the protest lacked these qualities. Largely through union infiltration, the long arm of the Third Internationale seemed at times to reach all the way to the North Star State when efforts to exploit real grievances and to confuse, disrupt, and subvert the

² On Governor Johnson's many progressive recommendations to the Minnesota legislature during his administration, see William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3:286-289 (St. Paul, 1926). See also Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West*, 187 (Madison, 1951); Hicks, *The Populist Revolt*, 258 (Minneapolis, 1931); and George H. Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 171 (Minneapolis, 1951).

³ Minnesota, *Legislative Manual*, 1953, p. 333.

⁴ Arthur Naftalin, "The Farmer Labor Party in Minnesota," 382, an unpublished doctor's thesis submitted at the University of Minnesota in 1945.

⁵ Currin V. Shields, "The American Tradition of Empirical Collectivism," in *American Political Science Review*, 44:104-121 (March, 1952).



WALLACE addressing
a meeting in
Minneapolis, 1947

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democratic processes were made in Minnesota. An early example of a truly dramatic clash within the ranks of the Farmer-Labor movement took place between the doctrinaire and highly disciplined forces of left-wing Marxism and the indigenous and reformist forces of Midwest progressivism in 1924. At that time such noted leaders as Samuel Gompers and Robert La Follette warned their followers not to attend a convention in St. Paul, predicting political suicide for those who took part in it.⁶ The fusion of the Democratic and Farmer-Labor parties in 1944 did not, and perhaps could not, eliminate this numerically small, but quite vociferous, segment of left-wing Marxist radicals. As a matter of fact, the very presence of some of these radicals within the ranks of the Farmer-Laborites had caused many old-line Democrats and independents to oppose earlier attempts at fusion.

⁶ Mayer, *Floyd B. Olson*, 184–222; Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent*, 358. On left-wing radicalism in Minnesota after 1917, see O. A. Hilton, “The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety in World War I,” in *Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, Bulletins*, 48:1–44 (Stillwater, Oklahoma, 1951).

⁷ William B. Hesseltine, *The Rise and Fall of Third Parties*, 87 (Washington, 1948).

The attitude of the Democratic party—and more particularly its so-called liberal New Deal wing—toward the political far left presented a major ideological problem not only for Minnesotans but for the nation as a whole. The problem was intensified after the Congressional elections of 1946. Two mutually antagonistic groups crystallized into organizations by the spring of 1947. On the left, the Progressive Citizens of America emerged from a fusion of the National Citizens Political Action Committee and the Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences and Professions. On the right appeared the Americans for Democratic Action.

With spokesmen like Henry A. Wallace for the left and such well-known New Dealers as Leon Henderson, Chester Bowles, Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., on the right, the issues soon became clearly drawn. The right-wing “non-Communist liberal” Americans for Democratic Action supported the Marshall Plan and President Truman’s Greco-Turkish aid program; the Progressive Citizens of America held these to be unwarranted circumventions of the United Nations, conceived in support of European forces of reaction and fascism.⁷ Whereas the Ameri-



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BENSON and Wallace, Minneapolis, 1947

cans for Democratic Action approved most of Truman's domestic, security, and defense measures, the Progressive Citizens of America considered them entirely inadequate halfway measures of a party which was doing little better than the Republicans. This clash of ideology and policy, debated at great length throughout the nation and in Congress, was personified locally by Mayor Hubert Humphrey of Minneapolis, a national leader of the Americans for Democratic Action, Orville Olson, chairman of the Independent Voters of Minnesota, and Ex-governor Elmer Benson, a leading figure in the Progressive Citizens of America.

Wallace himself left the national Democratic party after a now famous declaration on December 29, 1947, in which he denounced Truman and his program. Nevertheless, Benson and his Minnesota friends apparently decided early in 1948 that it would be politically wiser to work through the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party than to revert to the more traditional pattern of third-party politics. Speaking in Chicago at

the second annual convention of the Progressive Citizens of America, the former Minnesota governor declared, "if we retain control of the Democratic-Farmer Labor party at the state convention, Wallace will be the nominee and we will present him at the national Democratic convention. . . . If President Truman runs in Minnesota, he'll have to run as an independent, or however he wants to label it."⁸

Thus plans were made to push Wallace in Minnesota not as a third-party candidate, but as a regular Democratic-Farmer-Labor nominee whose name would go on the party ballot after his faction had captured the state party machinery. When the Democratic-Farmer-Labor state central committee met on February 20, the battle for control of the precincts began to take shape. The Humphrey-led right wing asserted its three to one lead over the Benson faction by appointing exclusively from its own ranks the steering committee which was to make arrangements for the precinct caucuses and the county and state conventions.⁹

THE HOSTILITY which the left wing felt for Mayor Humphrey and his followers is expressed in an editorial in the *Minnesota Leader*, then the organ of the pro-Wallace Democratic-Farmer-Labor Association. "Your association," it reads, "with the unsavory Americans for Democratic Action, created nationally to serve as liberal window dressing for the Wall Streeters and militarists behind Truman and created in Minnesota as a heaven for reactionary elements in the Democratic and Farmer Labor parties, is another indication of the character of your associations." It also accused the Minneapolis mayor of "close and friendly relations" with the Cowles press and General Mills, and of conducting a "reactionary" administration of city affairs; and it told the mayor that "by your associations and

⁸ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 17, February 22, 1948.

⁹ *Pioneer Press*, January 28, February 8, 20, 1948.

your record you have ruined any chance of your being an acceptable progressive candidate in the 1948 elections.”¹⁰ In the same paper the state chairwoman of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Association charged Humphrey with the disruption of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party in the 1944 and 1946 elections, with disloyalty to the party chairman, with red-baiting, and with giving support to Churchill’s foreign policy.

The leaders of the right wing answered in the *Minnesota Outlook*, where they published this indictment of the Wallace-Benson faction: “We are convinced that if the DFL is to win support, it must remove from positions of leadership all those who have represented or who have otherwise aided and abetted the program and tactics of the Communist party which believes—not in progress towards a free world—but in the reaction of totalitarianism and suppression of individual freedom.”¹¹

A BITTERLY contested battle of the two factions was to develop in the ranks of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor party in the spring of 1948. The party workers who were preparing for caucuses and conventions knew that the survival of their respective factions was at stake. The right wing made a strong offensive move on April 18, when its steering committee, under the leadership of Mayor Humphrey and the present governor, Orville Freeman, announced that Wallace’s third-party supporters were disqualified from taking part in the regular Democratic-Farmer-Labor sessions. All county chairmen who identified themselves with Wallace were asked to turn their credentials over to the next ranking Democratic-Farmer-Labor leader. In the meantime the state chairman for the Wallace

group countered this right-wing declaration by telling two thousand Wallace fans who met in the St. Paul Auditorium that “regardless of ‘talk’ about keeping them out,” they were, in fact, “legally entitled to participate in all DFL caucuses and should do so en masse.”

As the factional fight grew in intensity, charges and countercharges raised Democratic-Farmer-Labor tempers to the boiling point. Mayor Humphrey was quoted as saying that the third-party movement was part of a deliberate international pattern to confuse honest liberals and to hobble the functioning of democracy; that it was being used to serve the purposes of the Russian police state; and that, although most Minnesotans in the Wallace movement were non-Communist, Communists and party-line followers in all states were seeking with religious fanaticism to promote a third party as part of Moscow’s strategy to split Americans into ineffectual groups fighting among themselves.¹²

Wallace supporters, in the meantime, continued to attack the Marshall Plan, Truman’s cold-war strategy, universal military training, and the “reactionary nature” of domestic legislation passed by the Eightieth Congress. Theirs, they claimed, was a fight for peace through supporting Wallace as an independent candidate. Wallace himself was quoted as saying at Albuquerque that the Communists “support me because I say we can have peace with Russia.” He further clarified his position by stating: “I will not repudiate any support which comes to me on the basis of interest in peace. The Communists are interested in peace because they want a successful socialist experiment in Russia.”¹³

THE FACTIONAL battle reached its first significant parliamentary stage in the precinct caucuses of April 30. Aside from the customary citizenship and residence requirements, all that is needed for participation in such a caucus under Minnesota law is the assurance of a past vote (with the

¹⁰ *Minnesota Leader*, February, 1948.

¹¹ *Minnesota Outlook*, February 18, 1948.

¹² *Pioneer Press*, April 19, 29, 1948. The latter issue quotes Philip Murray of the CIO as stating that “The Communist party is directly responsible for the organization of a third party in the United States.”

¹³ *Pioneer Press*, June 4, 1948.

secret ballot precluding any external verification) or the promise of future affiliation with the party which is holding the caucus. When the results of these caucuses were finally tabulated, the right wing claimed a clear numerical majority throughout the state. This claim was loudly protested by leaders of the Wallace-Benson faction. After the county conventions of May 14, the right wing claimed still another victory, pointing out that only 161 of 402 state convention delegates had faced any contest at all, and that out of 76 county delegations, 59 were definitely anti-Wallace, 5 probably pro-Wallace, 4 uncertain, and 8 contested.¹⁴

On May 23, members of the Wallace-Benson faction, which was still very active, telegraphed Harold Barker, state chairman of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party, demanding that its delegates be allowed to participate in the state convention called for June 12 and 13 at Brainerd. Unless this demand was granted, they said, they would call their own convention in Minneapolis and would repudiate the Brainerd convention as illegal and irregular. While the delegates were assembling at Brainerd, a temporary pre-convention committee on credentials submitted a report giving a clear majority to the right wing. It showed that of 402 authorized delegates, 216 had been uncontested. Of the latter, 186 actually were present and ready to vote on the seating of the delegation.¹⁵ The committee arrived at these figures even before contested delegations from Hennepin, Ramsey, St. Louis, and other counties were seated. The Brainerd convention was to serve as a "political court of last appeal" at which the results of the bitter struggle between the right and left wings were finally determined.

One left-wing leader, Orville Olson, protested the convention's opening proceedings and denounced what he felt to be its unlawful and arbitrary conduct of business. A member of the incoming Hennepin County right-wing delegation replied by branding the Wallace "fringe" as "the Communist party in action, a movement of revolutionary

character," by asserting that the "Wallace movement is not a third party in the true American sense [and by] inferring that it is serving the interests of Moscow." Whereupon the convention voted "with an almost unanimous roar" to seat the right-wingers from Hennepin County.

The Wallace leaders thereupon held a hasty conference and decided to use the microphone in calling for a rump convention. When they were "greeted by loud laughter and derisive cries," five of the group gathered on the sidewalk in front of the convention hall and solemnly held a meeting, with Francis M. Smith of St. Paul acting as chairman. He appointed a secretary to keep minutes, declared the meeting a rump convention of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party, and then adjourned it to the American Federation of Labor Temple in Minneapolis, where a gathering of the left-wing faction was already in session.¹⁶

According to leaders of this group, five hundred delegates from fifty-one counties assembled for the Minneapolis convention. They listened eagerly as Benson termed the "program of Marshall, Forrestal, Dulles, Vandenberg and Co. the most gigantic international swindle of all time . . . intended to suppress common people in every part of the world."¹⁷ The convention then organized itself into the Progressive Democratic-Farmer-Labor League and endorsed James M. Shields of Minneapolis for the United States Senate and Walter Johnson of New York Mills for governor. In addition, five nominees were named for the national

¹⁴ *Pioneer Press*, May 20, 1948; *Minneapolis Star*, May 14, 1948. The attitude toward a third party of national leaders, including Mrs. Roosevelt and J. H. McGrath, Democratic national committee chairman, is expressed in the *Pioneer Press* for April 30. For the law relating to precinct caucuses, see Minnesota, *Statutes*, 1953, ch. 202.14.

¹⁵ *Pioneer Press*, May 23, 1948; "Brief for Petitioners," in 227 *Minnesota*, 52.

¹⁶ 227 *Minnesota*, 52, 54; L. D. Parlin, in the *Pioneer Press*, June 13, 1948.

¹⁷ See Carl Henneman, in the *Pioneer Press*, June 13, 14, 1948.

House of Representatives, eleven presidential electors pledged to Wallace were agreed upon, and delegates were chosen to attend the convention of the Progressive party in Philadelphia in July. As a final offensive stroke, the Minneapolis convention promptly presented its slate of presidential electors to the Minnesota secretary of state, claiming that since its group represented the true Democratic-Farmer-Labor ruling body, it was entitled to have its name placed on the ballot pursuant to the provisions of the Minnesota election code.¹⁸

Attorneys for the right-wing Brainerd convention then prepared a petition urging the Minnesota state supreme court to order the secretary of state, as the respondent, to reject the slate of the Minneapolis group as false and fraudulent and to substitute that of the petitioners as the true and legal one of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party of Minnesota. The secretary of state, speaking through the attorney-general, insisted that he had no facilities or authority to investigate or determine the truth or falsity of the conflicting representations, and asked the court to ascertain the facts and determine what course of action he should take with respect to accepting one or the other of the two certificates.¹⁹

IF CERTAIN factional and legal complexities which have no direct bearing upon the problem under discussion are overlooked, the case of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor state central committee, right wing, and others v. Mike Holm, secretary of state, raised and answered three fundamental questions: First, are the qualifications of members of a legally called political delegate convention subject to judicial determination and review? Second, is the legality of such a convention's actions affected by improper floor decisions? Third, does such an allegedly illegal action entitle disaffected

members to withdraw from a convention, to terminate its legal life by so doing, and to resuscitate in a newly assembled convention such former authority as did exist?²⁰

On September 2, 1948, the Minnesota supreme court handed down a unanimous decision in favor of the second slate, the Brainerd right-wing convention thus receiving negative answers to the three main questions raised. In support of its decision the court advanced two considerations: First, with regard to judicial review of the actions of political conventions, "In factional controversies within a political party where there is involved no controlling statute or clear right based on statute law, the courts will not assume jurisdiction, but will leave the matter for determination within the party organization." Second, in the absence of a controlling statute, "a political convention is the judge of the election, qualifications, and returns of its own members."

SCENE at Brainerd after Mayor Humphrey's nomination as senatorial candidate, 1948

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¹⁸ *Minneapolis Star*, June 14, 1948.

¹⁹ *227 Minnesota*, 52.

²⁰ *227 Minnesota*, 52; *33 North Western Reporter*, 831 (second series, 1948).

Such a convention is not a select body requiring "the presence of a majority of all persons entitled to participate in order to constitute a quorum for the transaction of business and, if that convention is regularly called, those who actually assemble constitute a 'quorum', and a majority of those voting is competent to transact business. . . . The withdrawal of either a majority or minority from a political convention does not affect the right of those remaining to proceed with the business of the convention, and those withdrawing cannot claim to be the legal party convention."²¹

The Minnesota court accepted the following proposition: "As elections belong to the political branch of the government, the courts will not be astute in seeking to find ground for interference, but will seek rather to maintain the integrity and independence of the several departments of the government by leaving questions as to party policy, the regularity of conventions, the nomination of candidates, and the constitution, powers, and proceedings of committees, to be determined by the tribunals of the party." This clearly reaffirmed the position that the Minnesota supreme court had taken earlier to the effect that "a political party, absent statutory restraints, makes its own reasonable rules for self-government."²²

THE LANGUAGE of the court leaves little doubt that it was the intent of the Minnesota judiciary so to construe applicable statutes that the affairs of party conventions, if correctly convened, are to be placed squarely in the hands of their duly elected delegates. Theirs, and not the judiciary's, is the responsibility for conducting the business of the party fairly and soundly. Legal theory at this point found itself in complete harmony with the well-established democratic principle that political power should always be centered in those whose actions are subject at least theoretically to popular scrutiny and accountability. And this faith in popular sovereignty was destined to be reinforced and mathematically underscored by the re-

sults of the primary election of September, 1948, when the right-wing nominees were victorious in all the important contests except that in the Seventh Congressional District. Even more significant were the results of the final election in November, which saw President Truman, then heading the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party ticket, garner 692,966 votes to the mere 27,866 cast in Minnesota for the Progressive party's candidate, Henry A. Wallace.²³ The successful right-wing struggle for control in the precincts, and in county, district, and state conventions provided President Truman with the type of major party instrumentality without which Minnesota's eleven electoral votes might well have gone to the Republican nominee. Not only the president's Minnesota victory, but Mayor Humphrey's election to the Senate and the addition of three Democratic-Farmer-Labor representatives to Congress, were hailed by right-wing leaders as direct results of the 1948 party struggle.

The outcome of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party schism of 1948 — showing as it does that the will of the majority can be made to prevail over the concerted efforts of even a better disciplined, numerically small, but closely knit party segment — serves to reaffirm faith in the vitality of the major party system. Most assuredly, lack of vigilance there as in other political activities can rob a free people of its treasured political heritage, should they ever grow weary of freedom or supinely take their liberties for granted. The intensity of the 1948 factional struggle within the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party and the resulting schism well illustrate vigilance and a willingness to do battle for the sake of political conscience.

²¹ 33 *North Western Reporter*, 831.

²² 29 *Corpus Juris Secundum*, Elections, section 88; case of Emil E. Holmes v. Mike Holm, in 217 *Minnesota*, 264.

²³ *Legislative Manual*, 1953, p. 165, 335. In the seventh district, James M. Youngdale, who was endorsed by the left wing, won by a vote of 6,452 to 5,958 for the right-wing candidate, Roy F. Burt.



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