

DLC/PPI | Key Document | July 10, 1996

## The New Progressive Declaration

### A Political Philosophy for the Information Age

At the dawn of the 21st century, America faces a turning point in our history—a pivotal moment in which old civic virtues must find fresh expression in new democratic institutions and in a new covenant between citizens and their commonwealth.

The industrial order of the 20th century, with its great concentrations of economic and political power, is giving way to a new society shaped by the centrifugal forces of the Information Age.

We cannot turn back these forces. But neither can we ignore the insecurity that these revolutionary changes breed or the reactionary impulses they threaten to unleash. We must, instead, manage the transition to enable all Americans to adapt to new conditions and take advantage of new opportunities. Above all, we must have the courage to break free of the past, to sweep aside old political ideas and governing structures that no longer serve the greater public good.

We know we can do this because we have done it before—during the Progressive era early in this century when Americans reinvented their democracy to cope with the dislocations and demands of rapid industrialism and urbanization.

Americans are ready for the challenge. Most have ceased believing that the solutions to today's problems are to be found in a larger, stronger central government—a course still supported by traditional liberals. Nor do they buy the conservative argument that the federal government is the source of our problems and that dismantling it will solve them.

America needs a third choice that replaces the left's reflexive defense of the bureaucratic status quo and counters the right's destructive bid to simply dismantle government. Such a "new progressive" governing philosophy sees government as society's servant, not its master—as a catalyst for a broader civic enterprise controlled by and responsive to the needs of citizens and the communities where they live and work.

*New Progressives seek to replace the old politics of top-down paternalism with a new politics of individual and civic empowerment. Because we can no longer rely on big institutions to take care of us, it is time to craft new policies and institutions that enable us to take care of ourselves and each other. Ultimately, our challenge is to create a new way of governing that fosters the skills and habits of civic enterprise that have atrophied over the past century of centralization.*

### A Governing Philosophy for the Information Age

The New Progressive Politics rests on three cornerstones—three ideals rooted in the progressive tradition of American democracy: **equality of opportunity, mutual responsibility, and self-government.**

The first cornerstone—the promise of equal opportunity for all and special privilege for none—has animated generations of American leaders and has attracted millions of immigrants to our shores. It is the *ideal* of a society in which individuals earn their rewards through their own talents and effort within a system of fair and open rules. It recognizes that there is no invisible hand that creates equal opportunity; it is a conscious social achievement that requires affirmative acts: removing discriminatory barriers, providing meaningful arenas for self-improvement, a commitment to public investment, and a rejection of special-interest subsidies that give the influential a leg up.

The second cornerstone—the principle of mutual responsibility—rests on a core idea: As a moral matter, we cannot rightly benefit from any association to which we are not prepared to contribute our fair share. It rejects libertarianism—the idea that we have no obligations other than the ones we choose; it is equally at odds with the philosophy of entitlement—the belief that we can make demands on others without giving something back.

The third cornerstone—genuine self-government—requires public institutions that empower our citizens to act for themselves by decentralizing power, expanding individual choice, and injecting competition into the delivery of public goods and services. From charter schools to tradeable pollution allowances, the new model uses the flexibility and ingenuity of private markets to serve public purposes.

Together, these principles constitute a very different political purpose, social ethic, and approach to governing from those that prevail today.

### Five Strategies for Renewing Democracy

Building on these cornerstone principles, we offer five key strategies to equip Americans to confront the challenges of the Information Age:

- We must restore the American Dream by expanding wealth, rather than redistributing it; by increasing opportunity through investing in economic growth and education; and by enhancing the security of workers by empowering them with greater responsibility for their own economic well-being.
- We must reconstruct our social order by strengthening families, attacking crime, and empowering the urban poor. A stable social order reflecting mutual trust and responsibility is the foundation upon which successful self-government depends.
- We must renew our democracy by both challenging the special interests that dominate decision-making and by returning power to citizens and local institutions. We must create a more open and competitive political system in which the influence of special interest money is sharply reduced. And we must stop complaining about the government and start reclaiming our government by taking back responsibility and political power for the decisions that affect us.
- We must defend the common civic ideals and the spirit of tolerance that enable America to draw strength and unity from its amazing diversity. Because we can no longer take our cultural cohesion for granted, we must all work harder to defend America's common ground—the values and institutions we share in common as well as our mutual rights and responsibilities as citizens—against those on either end of the political spectrum who would divide us.
- We must confront global confusion by building enduring new international structures of economic and political freedom. The collapse of the Cold War order presents America with an opportunity to reaffirm and safeguard our interests and values by constructing a new international system upon a foundation of democracy, free markets and human rights.

### **A Time for Radical Reform**

These strategies demand political audacity and imagination not seen in America since Franklin Roosevelt launched the New Deal. The politics of incrementalism will not suffice. We must embrace radical reform. We must demonstrate the seriousness of our purpose by confronting difficult issues such as revamping Social Security and Medicare; creating an education system for the Information Age; changing divorce laws to put children first; and reducing urban poverty through economic empowerment.

With this Declaration, we have outlined a New Progressive Politics for the Information Age. In an age of sound bite politics, a movement of transformative ideas may seem beside the point. Nothing could be further from the truth. The challenges of today resemble those of a century ago. And the response we offer mirrors—in new circumstances—the Progressive movement that reshaped our politics and renewed our country.

The ideas we offer here are proposals, not pronouncements; rough drafts, not finished products. We hope they will serve as a catalyst and framework for a long overdue national discussion to move us beyond the sterile left-right debate. We shall seek the help of leaders from all walks of American life and all political stripes. Like Progressivism a century ago, the New Progressive Politics must be the work of many hands.