

Will changed faces result in changed policies?

November 8, 2006

Greg Coleridge

In many ways, the Christmas season is most the difficult time of the year to talk about peace. Notions of love, compassion, and helping our fellow human beings are drowned out in the popular culture by the commercialization and marketing of stuff that promises more than it delivers.

In similar ways, election seasons are the most difficult time of the year to talk about substantive issues. This year was certainly no different. Problems that people deeply care about were often drowned out by the commercialization and marketing of candidates who raised high expectations of “change,” yet often watered down issues to not-so-lofty inane sound bites. Once again, many candidates were packaged to be bought (i.e. voted for) by the most number of consumers, er voters, rather than standing up for their true beliefs and/or laying out any comprehensive plans.

Election day is finally over. Many faces have changed at the federal and state levels. In the US House, Democrats will replace Republicans as the majority party.

Can we expect these changed faces in Washington to result in fundamentally changed policies? It depends.

By fundamentally changed policies, I mean basic laws and rules that provide We the People the ability to govern ourselves.

With candidates having raised such high expectations for “a real change,” “a sea change,” “a fresh change,” among others platitudes, it's time to hold these soon-to-be Representatives and Senators to their word.

What are real changes, sea changes and fresh changes in comparison to the tired and ineffective policies of the past? Here are 6 suggestions (one to be enacted for each day of their first week in office - with Sunday reserved for rest and reflection) of needed fundamental change:

1. Eliminate corporations from elections. Business corporations are creations of our government. Government has the power to determine what corporations can and cannot do. If We the People believe corporations are polluting politics (which they are), then getting rid of corporate political “contributions” (some call them “investments”) is an excellent clean-up strategy.
2. Abolish all international so-called “trade agreements” and start over. These agreements have never really been about “trade” (be they “free” or “fair”) but about who has the power to decide. That is, should the public have an authentic voice in deciding when, how, where, and under what terms corporations can move from a community to

some other nation or should corporations have the authority to make such decisions? I say it's high time to assert our sovereignty and democratically instruct corporations in ways that will promote our jobs and communities, as well as the environment.

3. Eliminate the “Commerce Clause” (Article 1, Sec 8) from the US Constitution. This nifty provision, exalting commerce above all other priorities, has been used hundreds of times by federal courts to overturn local and state laws protecting the health, safety and welfare of communities - including protecting local business from national and transnational corporations and in preventing the importation of toxic and radioactive garbage from outside communities.

4. Let people directly vote on major national issues. Many communities and states, including Ohio, allow citizens to bypass politicians and place important issues directly on the ballot for voter consideration. Why not the federal level? Why shouldn't the public be able to have a vote on, say, ending the war in Iraq or creating national health insurance?

5. Guarantee workers the right of Free Association. The US Bill of Rights, including the First Amendment rights of Free Speech and Free Assembly, only applies in public places. Once a person sets foot on corporate property, the Bill of Rights is meaningless. Laws need to be changed permitting working people the right to freely organize without obstruction on corporate property. Why shouldn't it be just as easy for a group of people to form a union as it is for those who want to form a corporation?

6. Remove the power of the US Supreme Court, called “Judicial Review,” in having the final say on constitutionality. Why should an unelected, appointed-for-life group of millionaires have the final word on what is and isn't constitutional in our country? The Supremes have come to have ultimate power overturning local, state and federal laws on an increasing number of important decisions with no checks and balances. This is fundamentally undemocratic.

The day after elections, winning candidates often immediately lower expectations of what “realistically” can be done during their time in office. We should hear none of it. Our nation is a mess. Most of it stems from the public having no real fingerprints on what policies; rules and laws are proposed, passed, implemented and evaluated. It's time We the People take charge, grab the opportunity, and force politicians to create real change that is so desperately needed.

Coleridge is Director of the Economic Justice & Empowerment Program of the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and is a member of the collective of the Program on Corporations, Law & Democracy (POCLAD).