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Why I Feel Sorry for Bernie Sanders

Ron Tabor

September 25, 2019

Although I might be going out on a limb to say this, I believe we are now witnessing the beginning of the end of Bernie Sanders' quest for the Democratic nomination for president. According to recent polls, Sanders has been declining in popularity among likely Democratic primary voters and is now polling behind Elizabeth Warren, whose popularity has lately been surging. (According to one recent poll out of Iowa, Warren is now running ahead of even Joe Biden, the long-time leader.) I doubt Sanders' decline will be temporary. Unless Warren commits a brazen error or someone unearths something very unattractive about her past, I suspect that he will continue to fade while she gains momentum.

There seem to be several factors behind Sanders' decline. Among them:

1. Warren seems to have more energy than Sanders. At the last debate, Sanders seemed to be very tired, close to exhaustion. True, he was suffering from a cold, but there seemed to be something more at work. He may simply be running out of

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gas. After all, he's been campaigning since 2015 (at least); and at 78, he is, as they say, not getting any younger.

2. Warren has more, and seemingly fresher, ideas than Sanders. Although I find it a bit tiresome, she has a "plan" for everything, while he seems to be repeating the same phrases over and over.
3. Since almost all the Democratic candidates have moved over to embrace, at least broadly, the policies Sanders has long advocated, he no longer comes across as being unique. For example, while they may not advocate "Medicare for All" (in the sense of a government-run "single-payer" healthcare system that eliminates the private insurance market), they all support "Universal Healthcare," that is, healthcare for all. Likewise with "Free College" and "Cancel Student Debt."
4. "Identity politics" has caught up with Sanders. Given the continuing vogue of the "identity" issues (including such concepts as "intersectionality"), who Sanders "is" in this sense has become a problem. Simply put, he's an old, heterosexual, white (and Jewish) male, none of which, to the "identity politics" aficionados, is an asset. Meanwhile, although Warren is 70, she is younger than Sanders and comes across, in terms of both her appearance and her energy, to be younger than her nominal age. Not least, she is obviously, and probably most importantly, a woman. (Warren also claims to have Cherokee ancestry, although since this has been a problem for her in the past — she is not a recognized member of the tribe — she is not likely to emphasize it.)
5. One of Sanders' chief calling cards, the claim that he is a "democratic socialist," may now have become a liability. What seemed in the past to be something harmless, almost

though Sanders doesn't denounce capitalism, he does criticize it in quasi-Marxist terms. He fulminates against economic inequality and berates the "billionaire class," a kind of surrogate for the "ruling class" or "capitalist class" of Marxism. While he no longer calls for a socialist revolution, he does call for a "political" one. In his own way, I believe, Bernie Sanders still sees himself as fighting for the working class, the "proletariat," and for the cause of "international socialism."

So, at or near the end of his political career, Bernie Sanders, a long-time socialist activist (I suspect he once considered himself to be a revolutionary), is on national TV during the recent Democratic debate. It is becoming obvious, or ought to be, that he is not going to win the nomination; he is being out-campaigned by a younger, more energetic, and more acceptable candidate, Elizabeth Warren. In this situation, Bernie has lobbed at him, like a huge softball being thrown underhand (the kind almost anybody can hit), a simple question, "What, to you, is "democratic socialism?" And Bernie Sanders answers, in what seemed to me to be a very tired voice, "It is what they have in Canada and in the Scandinavian countries..."

It is almost certainly too much even to dream of, but wouldn't it have been nice if Bernie Sanders (somewhat like the Charlie Chaplin character in *The Great Dictator*, for those who might remember), the erstwhile socialist revolutionary, had stood up tall on national TV, and speaking to an audience of millions without mincing his words, had denounced American and global capitalism as the rotten, brutal, and corrupt system it is; excoriated its cynical, greedy, and dishonest elite and its political stooges; called for all working and oppressed people to unite, to rise up and tear the system apart and replace it with a truly democratic, cooperative, and egalitarian society, a society actually run by and for the people?

But Bernie didn't have it in him. ("Democratic socialism is what they have in Canada and the Scandinavian countries...") And for that, I can't forgive him.

quaint, has recently gotten some content attached to it, specifically, the brutal, inept, and unpopular "Bolivarian socialist" government of Victor Maduro in Venezuela, and behind that, the other extant and defunct regimes of the "socialist" and "Communist" variety. Although Warren can champion some of Sanders' specific policy proposals, she is not burdened by the "socialist" label. Quite the contrary. While being a "socialist" at least implies being against capitalism, Warren insists that she is a fervent supporter of the system; she merely wants to make it "work for the people."

6. Sanders' campaign has experienced some difficulties. There have been reports of sexual harassment of female staff during his 2016 campaign. More recently, there was some bad publicity surrounding a union organizing drive among his campaign workers. Most recently, there have been shake-ups of his campaign staff in New Hampshire and Iowa. All of this does not reflect well on Sanders' managerial abilities.

I have to confess to having mixed feelings about Sanders. Overall, my view is negative. I know that many "progressives" praise him for raising crucial social issues — economic inequality, the need for universal healthcare, the burden of student debt, the excessive wealth and power of the very rich — to public consciousness. Some leftists laud him for promoting the idea, or at least the term, of "socialism," believing that this somehow helps the cause. In contrast, I see Sanders mostly as being dishonest and disingenuous. This becomes very clear when he is asked to explain what he means by "democratic socialism," and he responds, as he did during the last debate, by saying that "democratic socialism" is "what they have in Canada and in the Scandinavian countries," where they have universal healthcare and strong unions. The claim that these countries are "socialist" in any way, shape, or form is ridiculous, and Sanders knows it.

After all, Bernie Sanders was, for many years, a socialist activist. As a young man, he was a member of the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL), a youth group of the Socialist Party. At least at the time Sanders was a member, YPSL was much more radical than its parent party. While I doubt Sanders' conception of socialism was ever as revolutionary and as libertarian as ours, I believe he had an image of socialism as a social system that was qualitatively different from capitalism, particularly the imperialist "welfare state" of Sanders' (and our) youth. It is also likely that Sanders once considered (and might even still consider) himself to be a Marxist. He is on record as having praised the Cuban Revolution and Castro's regime, the Soviet Union, and the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, all of which he visited. When he and his wife honeymooned in the Soviet Union, he praised both the Communist Party youth organization and the Moscow subway system. When he moved to Vermont and went into bourgeois politics, I suspect Sanders believed that he was continuing the "good fight," namely, the struggle to overthrow capitalism and replace it with a social system he believed to be much better — something more productive, more just, and more fair than capitalism — namely, "socialism."

But like all leftists who decide to enter mainstream politics, Sanders was faced with the tension, if not the outright contradiction, between fighting for his ideals — in his case, promoting the cause of socialism as he understood it — and compromising in the interests of being "effective." The compromises usually start small, but once one commits oneself to a career within the system, they become easier to make. And little by little, the socialist activist morphs into a liberal capitalist politician.

This, roughly, is what happened to Sanders. I remember that at one point, Sanders and his campaign were featured prominently in the *Militant*, the newspaper of the (then Trotskyist) Socialist Workers Party. Running explicitly revolutionary socialist candidates in bourgeois elections was a central tactic of that organization. And whether one agreed with their politics or not, their campaigns were

"maximalist," that is, they ran not to win the election but to carry out revolutionary propaganda and agitation. Whatever else they said, their candidates attacked capitalism and called on the working class and all oppressed people to unite to overthrow the system and replace it with socialism. I doubt that Sanders' campaign would have been featured in the *Militant* if he had not carried out a "maximalist" — that is, an explicitly "socialist" — campaign.

But it is one thing to run a maximalist campaign for president, which, at least in this country, is not likely to succeed. It is another thing to run for a local office as an explicit socialist in a very liberal, even radical, state such as Vermont. Sanders first campaigned to be the mayor of Burlington, Vermont, and got elected. But once one is in office, the demand for compromises escalates, both to govern a city (within the capitalist system) effectively and, eventually, to get re-elected. And like all such figures, Sanders compromised: among other things, he made a deal with real estate developers to revitalize downtown Burlington; he also, in one instance, had radical demonstrators sitting in his office arrested.

But unlike other "movement" figures who pursued careers in bourgeois politics, Sanders kept calling himself a "socialist," at some point adding the adjective "democratic" in front. In once radical (and still very liberal) Vermont, the "socialist" label was not a liability. (Along with the fact that he ran as an Independent, this may even have been an asset, since it implied that Sanders had principles, a commitment to an ideal.) However, along the way, Sanders' public explanation of what "socialism" is got so diluted that it became little more than the despised "welfare state" that Sanders, as a young socialist activist, once struggled to overthrow.

So, here Sanders is today, at or very close to the end of his political career. To be sure, he's made his share of compromises. But he's also worked very hard and, hopefully, done some good, aka "made a difference" for working class and lower middle-class people in Vermont and perhaps in the rest of the country. Not least, he has kept the cause, or at least the word, "socialism" alive. Al-