

Speech to the Richmond Greens and the Green Party of Virginia

The following is a transcript of a speech by Ralph Nader, on February 19, 2001, at a fundraiser to jointly benefit the Richmond Greens and the Green Party of Virginia. The event was held at the Student Commons of Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. Transcription courtesy of the Richmond Greens.

"Well the election is over and you know who won?.....(Crowd laughs) The corporate government is.... up to control one department agency after another and the politicians are struggling to see who is going to take marching orders from their corporate fundraisers in great demand now...and they raise millions of dollars each week talking about campaign finance reform legislation which may pass, its very modest it just gets to the soft money it may have to increase to in return, to hard money limits per individual from two thousand dollars an entire election season to maybe four thousand. That's what the opposition may trade off for McCain, Feingold.

But lets not get too absorbed in intricacies of the two parties, strategies of protected imitation, and rhetorical differences.

We have to wise up to what this country needs, what the world needs, and move to build a political movement in that direction and one of humility about our generation which has such great technology, we are in about 150 year low in the ability of a society to organize a political movement. Just think of that?

We are nothing compared to the Abolitionist Movement, Women's suffrage Movement, Trade Union movement, Civil Rights Movement, fire? And Progressive Populist movement, if they were around today they could teach us some lessons, we are amateurs by comparison.

Well someone says " that's because slavery is not around, in any institutional sense, women have the right to vote, and workers can ban together to form trade unions, so maybe its not as, necessary. Well everything has its grave challenges and we have our own. We live in a world where we have the technology to destroy the planet, inadvertently, when we have weapons systems that can destroy it directly.

And there are more people dying of malaria in the world today than ever before, despite the availability of modern medicine. That doesn't get distributed, mass starvation around the world serious malnutrition, and we are leading the history in the world in terms of devastation of the environment, so its not like we are lacking for challenges right, or serious injustices to deal with?

The question is what lessons of history haven't we learned? We have the model of our forefathers who took on giant corporations, who took on cotton plantations, ignorance and bigotry, and moved the society forward.

Not with total victory, but a lot better, remember until 1832 in Britain people who were debtors were executed. Can you imagine how many people would be executed today in the U.S. ?

That was abolished in the early 1830's, in England, which at that time was supposed to be one of the more enlightened countries. So we start out with what the challenges are, and there is obviously a huge consensus in this world if you just count people for all these things I have just mentioned. For environmental preservation, for abolition of poverty, for a real major assault on global infectious diseases, and for the democratization of society, and whether there are totalitarian authoritarian symbolic democracies or thin democracies. There is just a lot of consensus for all this, but the consensus doesn't have the power that the opposition to these changes has. And that is what democracy is all about, to connect justice, truth, civic access to power.

Cicero put it best, he said, " freedom is participation in power". That is not a definition of freedom I learned about in my political science courses in university, and without community there's crisis.

The distinctive impact of corporations, among many others, is that it advances excessive individuation. It basically does everything it can to break up community.

It doesn't like environmental groups. It doesn't like check off systems for labor unions.. It doesn't like a whole host of ways that people can band together in various areas of their life and various themes of their life as workers, consumers, taxpayers communities, whatever.

Whenever you see efforts to do that, you'll see corporations on the other side. Now a corporation is a community and they love to have all the privileges and immunities that lets them band together as investors and executives of corporations, board of directors, etc. But somehow they don't like others to have that same facility, they want a full right to go to court, and sue anyone they want, but they pressure legislators here and in Congress to restrict ordinary peoples rights to go to court. Virginia is one of the culprits here. You ask yourself if you are subject to a deadly mal practice that disables you for life, ask your self how much can you get in Virginia. What is the maximum? One and a half million dollars. Let's say you are a teenager you become a quadriplegic you have a life expectancy of 50, 60 years, given inflation eroding that what is left of that one and a half million dollars? There are corporate executives who make that in a week with out any pain and suffering.

So why should the lawmakers in Virginia be able to enact a law, which says no matter how serious the injury by a criminally negligent corporation or hospital, no matter how expensive your maintenance is going to be in terms of rehabilitation and care throughout your life, no matter how much a jury and judge subject to appellate review decides to reward you, you can't get more than a million and a half dollars in a court of law.

You see, there is an asymmetry isn't there between corporations who have all the rights we have, as real people under the constitution and a whole host of privileges and immunities, that we do not have.

Corporations are quite different than you and me, it's good for you to make a list of this somehow. You just keep adding to it; they can be in a thousand places at once around the world, you can't. They create their own parent called a holding company for evasive maneuvers, you can't. They could move their wares and transfer their pricing into foreign jurisdictions like tax havens and get away with not paying taxes. You are often responsible for what happens try to find out who in a corporation is responsible when a product like a Dalkon Shield, made by the A. H. Robins corporation here in Richmond mutilated 10's of thousands of women, try to find out who in the company is responsible for that. They have limited liability, that ability to stand selling and profiting and then going into chapter 11 bankruptcy so they can deal with their creditors in a very minimal way.

It is hard for individual to do these things, not to mention a whole host of others. In any civic movement you have to pay attention to its growing into big multinational corporations.

It really makes a mockery out of equal justice under law. You don't really believe that you are equally just under the law with General Motors or Exxon, it's apples and oranges. (Crowd Laughs)

They [Corporations] are not real Human beings.

They [Corporations] dominate all media. Media on the airwaves that we own legally as a people and the radio/ t.v. stations pay nothing for use of these airwaves. 24 hours a day it's free, compliments of the federal communications commission and congress.

They are the tenants we are the landlords, and we can't even get on, we have to beg. We have to work hard as a citizen group in Richmond and do something, make a proposal, have a press conference, then have our fingers crossed, and hope the TV and radio will come. If they come will they give us 30 seconds on the evening news which is filled with four minutes of weather, four minutes of sports, nine minutes of advertisements, and one minute of chit-chat and street crime scenes.

Then they say they don't have time for what is going on here in Richmond, Virginia.

Well you say, that's our property! Oh no, you think its your property, but they control what you own

. We own a third of the United States as a people, the public lands with all the minerals and timber and grazing lands and we don't control it. You know who controls it. We own five trillion dollars worth of pension money of the workers, and the banks, insurance companies, GE and IBM and others don't want you to control the investment.

And all of these huge assets that the people legally own together with one another, if we ever began to control that, could you imagine how we could reshape the future of this country. Could you imagine the priorities that could be redirected? (applause) If you look ahead in the next thirty, forty, fifty years, we have got to transform our nation into a soft energy path, solar energy efficiency. We can't keep going with coal, oil, gas & nuclear even if we have plenty of it for thousands of years for the environmental reasons. You know, as well as I do the geopolitical struggles that come over oil, etc. We have got to do that. Who is going to do that? The oil companies have no interest in it. The nuclear power companies, they have their own little concentrated capital investments. Oil, coal, gas, nuclear, no one else can really compete with them, and they control the policy of energy in Washington.. That gives them all kinds of tax credits and free research and development and other subsidies and giveaways

. Meanwhile solar energy is trying to make it on its own. And it's advancing, it's advancing, but not as fast as it needs to. Wind power, solar thermal, solar portable... eh, some of you may be leaders in that global energy renewable movement someday, it takes a political movement to catapult it to a higher level in our political priorities. The same with poverty. You know there are lots of European nations that abolished poverty in the 50's and 60's. Out of the rubble of World War II they managed to cobble themselves a social safety net together to do so.

We still haven't done that! We still have the highest percent of our people living in poverty including children of any western country, including Japan. Where 20 % of California's children, 25% of the District of Colombia's children, 33% child poverty. Just think about that, the richest country in the world?

What are we sitting around doing? What are the students here going to think of themselves in 60 years. Look back and say what did you do with your life? Well, had a house in the Hampton's. (crowd laughs) Bought a nice boat, what else? Earned a lot of money. You'd have an empty feeling if you didn't make some justice. We really did interview some of these people, who are now in their 70's, former corporate lawyers retired, they have an empty feeling. They missed the justice train. They spent their lives representing corporations in evermore narrow areas of specialization. So they didn't have a broad point of references as to what they could do to advance justice as lawyers. If anybody could do that, people trained in the law, and how to deal with raw power could. They knew they blew it and they knew that the money that they piled up in their investments just wasn't satisfactory enough, but by the time they had realized it, they had retired.

You don't want to get into that level, but there are just so many unacceptable injustices that are systemic in nature we have got to do something about it and if we want to do something about it that means we are concerned, but that's not enough.

The difference is being concerned or are you serious. You will find out today in this little fundraiser through the Green Party. You will find out whether you will give to the Green party or McDonalds, just a few yards away, with that greasy, fat ridden, anti-nutritional junk. (roar of applause) Because when the Greens raise money they only raise it for people, individuals. Our campaign refuses to take corporate money, soft money, or political action committee money. For which we got no credit in the editorial papers, and news papers. I'll tell you it is a great relief, never once did we ever have to say in our minds, "We are getting money from this source, what do they want back?" Often times you don't have think what they want back, they tell you. They(Richmond Greens) are starting out on the right level and they want you to help them. Let them do that.

First we have to realize that that we can move forward much faster than we've been moving. When you reach a period of stagnant status quo when it comes to the advance of justice in a society you have to think it's very hard to achieve it. Therefore you tend to feel overwhelmed, and therefore you tend to feel more powerless, and therefore, you tend to become more apathetic.

And if you're really apathetic ,you're part of a mass of people who when asked, "What's the difference between apathy and ignorance", you'll say, "You don't care, and you don't know".

That's the bottom level.

On the other hand, if you look how people in the past have took on these big challenges you'd be ashamed of not doing it here, because they did it without electricity, without telephones, without motor vehicles, without fax machines, without e-mail.

How did those farmers 120 years ago start this great populist progressive revolt in America against the banks and the big railroads? They didn't have telephones! They had no cars! But in six months they organized in east Texas, 200,000 dues paying farmers who were dirt poor. six months door to door, person to person. See the difference? They weren't just concerned, they had a sense of urgency.

Our society has contented classesand the contented classes often are the ones that can change things. They are the ones who get their calls returned. But the problem is they are contented. They may be in the upper the upper 15% of the income level and you'll be in the upper 15% . . . you'll be in the upper 5% . . . 10% . . . 1%. You got to watch out for a system that makes you so contented about yourself that you're indifferent about others.

It's an inter-connected world today, tuberculosis is coming to the U.S. in a drug-resistance form. International travel being what it is, environmental degradation being what it is, there's no such things as national boundaries sealing us off and that will be even more explicit as genetic engineering gets underway with Monsanto wanting to transform the genetic inheritance of a plant into a 20-year patent property monopoly

. You'll see more of that in terms of artificial intelligence . . . and you'll see more of that remoteness in absentee control, just the way millions of farmers may be absentee controlled by a couple of corporations who control the patents of certain seeds. You'll see more of that and you're going to see more,"A Brave New World," by Aldus Huxley . . . you're going to see more of the kind of remote control of peoples lives. You're going to see more repressed expectation levels, you're going to see more of this kind subtle controlling processes taking hold in one area after another so that you don't even see what's wrong after a while.

You watch the evening news and you don't say, "Hey that's our property. Why don't they really report and give voice to what's going on here in Richmond. That's our property!"

Are we going to do something about it, they just lease it from us for nothing." Instead we sit watching the news and we spend four minutes watching the weather. You know, starting in the North West and coming across the Great Plains heading over the Allegheny's into Richmond. Telling us the different temperatures between suburbs three miles apart, and what the temperature was 20-years ago...and you're saying why isn't this time being used to report (people laughing) on important activities, serious activities, serious injustices?

Well, because we don't control what we own, that's why. We don't have our own audience network, that's why. Because if you don't have any expectation levels that can critique the evening news in contexts of public ownership of this Commonwealth, which has been the case since the 1920's. As Congressional activists, you'll say, "I guess that's the way it is" and you'll define freedom as flicking off the station.

In other words, you'll define freedom as exit, not voice and that's what a concentrated system of power does in a modern society.

It makes you think you are free because you can quit.

So if you've got the money, you quit the public school systems for your kids. You can have your own private clubs. You can have your own way of traveling without having to use a degraded mass transit.

It's an easy way to exit, but most people can't exit and some people who can may be just fooling themselves over a period of time in thinking that they can go through their whole life with that kind of exit.

The Green Party is a little party. A little party that is trying to surmount a two-party duopoly.

It's like climbing a cliff with a slippery rope. The two parties collaborate to exclude others.

They have control of this company, called the Debate Commission. The gateway to tens of millions of voters during the presidential campaign. They created it. They control it. They've had it funded by Phillip Morris, by Anheiser-Bush and Ford Motor Co. and they decide the rules. They decide who doesn't get on the debates. They decide the questioner, Jim Leher. It's a nice little cushy thing and that's has to be broken . . . And that's one of our projects is to break the grip of the debate commission. (applause) They control the statutory variances for getting on a ballot. . . What is it 10,000 signatures to get on it, here in Virginia? Well, in North Carolina, it's 52,000, and you better get a 100,000 because they pick and disqualify them for trivial reasons. And in Oklahoma, it's got 3.5 million people or whatever, it's 38,000 and that's the result of legislation passed by the Republican and Democratic parties.

They control the money, they command most of the media and they start out with 35% of the vote each; hereditary Democratic, hereditary Republicans. And then they say, ok folks, third party, challenge us.

Pretty hard. We're going to have to break it, and we will if we want to. And if we want to, we will get it done, right? But we got to have to (cheers) initiate it.

Here's Thomas Jefferson: He says "It behooves our citizens to be on their guard to be firm in their principles, and to be full of confidence in themselves, we are able to preserve our self-government, if will but think so".

Just think of it, think of how many thoughts he had in that few words.

Think of that concise nature of that civic self-confidence.

He once said, "The purpose of representative government is to counteract the excesses of the moneyed interest". Today, the corporate interests.

Make a list of the ten most serious problems in the world.

Ask yourself whether the now dominant and unchallenged multinational corporations are contributing to worsening these injustices, are indifferent to these injustices, or are improving or reducing these injustices. Just test it yourself. Dictatorships, environment, poverty, disease, what are they doing? They're cutting deals with dictators as long as they can make profit? Shoring up their repressive regimes. They're selling arms to anyone who will buy them, because profit is the bottom line. With our taxpayer subsidies, they are selling these weapon systems all over the world. The fossil fuel industry is contributing heavily to ozone depletion and to global warming. And it's keeping everything at bay when it comes to displacement energy like renewable energy. They will even buy up photovoltaic companies, make sure they don't grow too fast. Who's behind the cutting of equatorial forests? Big corporations in Japan, and in the U.S., and South Korea. Who is doing anything about global infectious diseases? It's the U.S. army and the US Navy, it isn't the big pharmaceutical companies. They don't make money with vaccines, and drugs bought by poor people.

That's why we've been working on the AIDS medicines over seas. One of our associates just got a drug company in India to agree to break the price of AIDS medicine which is now 10,000 dollars per person, per year in Africa, this Indian drug company has agreed to do it for 350 dollars per year. But do you see, look how long it takes, 3.5 million dying of aids in Africa. But these drug companies are into "lifestyle drugs", drugs you have to take everyday or every week to grow hair on your bald head, etc.

And the fast food industry? What are they doing? What is the food industry doing about world hunger? You'd think they would want more customers? (crowd laughs) They are trying to set up fat food, ah, fast food, dumping fat and sugar into people's bodies, replacing their indigenous diets so that heart disease rates go up etc. It's just a great exercise.

You know all we are hearing is propaganda about how great these companies are. When you really get down to the facts and you read some of the best stories, in Business Week, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, if you look, all of this is reported. It is just that we are not doing anything about it.

Our democracy is collapsing under these corporate pressures, which now buy our elections and run our governments. So that even when the mainstream press exposes all of this, day after day, in page one stories, in Sixty Minutes, 20/20, nothing happens. Nothing happens...

That's the symptom. You see that's the canary bird telling you that we don't have an institution strong enough to take this exposure and link it action.

Now we come down to how is the Green Party going to grow? It needs to grow! It has a good agenda, the best, broadest, deepest platform of any political party. Just look at it and read it, it's on the internet. They need good people, who are willing to work more than they talk. That's not a difficult achievement. If they have that as a criteria, people have to be able to work!

The only place democracy comes before work is in the dictionary. (crowd laughs)

But that is not enough, it needs people who are long distance runners. People who get personal gratification from striving for justice. People who'd like to take on the Goliath's. People who are willing to find other people who are like themselves who can lock arms and move forward.

The Green Party also doesn't spend much money, but unfortunately doesn't get its phone bills free.

They hate to raise some money. They hate to raise money, the Green party. They are some of the most anti-money people you've ever met. But there are certain bills that have to be paid! The printing bills have to get paid! There needs to be an office here in Virginia with a staff, and anything you can do to contribute to that would be good. Just knock off 5 McDonald hamburgers in the next week, chew on some carrots and give your money to the Green Party. (applause) It will improve your health.

I have to ask you a question, who here has never been inside a McDonalds? (The crowd begins to turn their heads, looking for any raised hands. A woman in the very back of the crowded room holds up her daughter, who seemed to be about 2 years old.)

The baby and me have never been inside a McDonalds. (more applause from the crowd)

Also this book we put out, which is available for those of you who want to save money, this is "Wining the Insurance Game", I co-wrote it with Wesley Smith. It can save you hundreds of dollars a year, because most people don't know how to buy insurance. They don't know what to buy, they don't know how to buy, and they have trouble pursuing their claims when the company doesn't want to pay up. This is the guidebook for all of that. And this is one called "How to get the best from your Doctor," which is very important in terms of people knowing how to choose a Doctor, how to ask the Doctor the right questions, and so on. So there are editions up here to make a further contribution.

Finally, because I have been told we don't have much time. Once you have a stronger third party other things begin to happen. There are some states where students have powerful citizen groups, called public research interest groups.

But not in Virginia, we tried it in Virginia, years and years and years ago, but it didn't work. The regents and the trustees and the presidents didn't want students to have a referendum. Add 200 bucks on to your tuition bill, the students who dissent can always decline to pay. The money goes to a non-profit group run by students on the board of directors elected by their fellow students, who then hire economists, organizers, lawyers, environmentalists, etcetera and go to work to improve the state that they are going to school in.

In places like Mass. and New York, they have the most powerful citizen groups. In New York they have a 3 million dollar budget, 10 offices, over one hundred full time staff. Some of the students get course credit for working on the projects developed by their public interest research groups. If you'd try that here in Richmond, in the legislature, you'd probably get about 10 votes to permit you to do that in state funded, state sponsored universities.

You have a new party, a progressive new party, you are more likely to establish that kind of organization. A lot of other things flow from that as well. The main thing is that you have the right to do it! So you need to get motivation from three sources. First, our forbears who did do it at their finest moments. I mean when you see what they went through, how would you have liked to have been an abolitionist in 1840, in Virginia? Look what they went through! How would you like to be a suffrage movement worker? You know they were all beat and spit on, arrested just because they wanted women to be given the right to vote. Or the workers hired by the coal mines and the oil companies and then tried to form unions when the working conditions were... you couldn't believe the working conditions today. The deaths and the injuries. More people, in our country, have died in the coalmines from 1890 to today, from coal mine shaft collapses , breathing deadly coal dust leading to "coalminers <unintelligible>," more coalminers have died in that period of time than all the Americans who were killed in World War II. Not to mention slave wages, etc. So how would you like to be organized? When you look back at what they did and what they were able to

achieve, and what we have inherited by what they have achieved, these are really tough odds we are up against. You feel like a jerk! So, it is good to feel like a jerk. Let that motivate you. The second source of motivation is the state of the world! It's really a shame on humanity's conscience that we allow such horrible brutality and viciousness and the destruction of life's possibilities when we have so many capabilities and so much knowledge to perform otherwise. Third is your sense of legacy to children and grand children. Posterity. When was the last time you heard a politician use the word posterity? It's always used by Jefferson, Lincoln, all these forbears that they were actually very concerned of what future generations will think of them.

But how concerned are we? Are we going to have future generations curse us because we are the last generation who had to give up so little in order to achieve so much. And that's the difference between being serious with a sense of urgency or just being concerned. That's the difference. Thank You. (Applause)