

# Reform Party in US lines up behind ultra-rightist Patrick Buchanan

**Patrick Martin**  
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Last weekend's upheaval in the Reform Party—the ouster of Chairman Jack Gargan, the takeover by supporters of right-wing presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan, and the resignation of Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura—marks a major turning point in the political trajectory of this organization.

Only six months ago, at the Reform Party convention in Dearborn, Michigan, Ventura was hailed as the party's new “star” and Gargan, Ventura's personal choice, was elected party chairman over two other candidates considered closer to the party's founder, Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot. But at a meeting of the party's executive committee Saturday in Nashville, Tennessee, Gargan was removed from office by an overwhelming vote. The day before, Ventura held a press conference where he announced he was quitting the party and urged the Minnesota state Reform Party to break with the national group.

The immediate cause of the breakup in the Reform Party is the conflict over the party's presidential nomination, which has raged since Buchanan ended his third bid for the Republican nomination last October and announced he was shifting his efforts to the Reform Party, whose nomination will provide a place on the ballot in many states and \$12.6 million in federal funds for the general election campaign.

Buchanan's candidacy has had the tacit support of Perot, who ran for president as an independent in 1992 and as the candidate of the Reform Party in 1996. Buchanan announced his decision to leave the Republican Party and seek the Reform Party nomination for president in 2000 after consultations with the Texas billionaire.

Perot's 1996 running mate Patrick Choate agreed to serve as co-chairman of Buchanan's campaign, and Buchanan began efforts to place his own name on the ballot in states where Reform does not have ballot status.

Ventura and Gargan opposed Buchanan's candidacy, suggesting a series of alternatives less closely identified with extreme-right politics, ranging from former Connecticut Senator and Governor Lowell Weicker to real estate billionaire Donald Trump. In the end, none of these potential candidates agreed to make the race. Trump flirted with the idea publicly for several months, but after Saturday's political coup in

Nashville he made a public announcement that he was no longer interested.

For several months the struggle over the nomination was fought out by proxy, in a conflict within the Reform Party executive committee over where the party's presidential nominating convention would be held. Ventura and Gargan favored St. Paul, Minnesota, where their supporters would likely be in the majority. Perot's adherents, who held a majority on the executive committee, proposed Long Beach, California—about as far from Minnesota as it is possible to be in the continental US.

The struggle came to a head after Gargan actually took office January 1, succeeding longtime Perot political aide Russell Verney. A January 9 conference call of the executive committee voted 7-4 to overrule Gargan on the location of the convention and summoned a meeting of the National Committee for Nashville. This meeting convened Saturday in an atmosphere of heavy-handed intimidation, with police standing by, threatening to arrest Gargan and his supporters if they disrupted the proceedings.

The National Committee voted first to remove Gargan as chairman of the meeting, and then, by a margin of 109-31, to remove him from office altogether. Two officers aligned with Perot, Vice Chairman Gerry Moan and Secretary Jim Mangia, retained their positions, but Treasurer Ronn Young, a Gargan supporter, was also removed from office. Young filed suit the next day in US District Court, seeking the party's financial records, which he says were never turned over to him by his predecessors, who are loyal to Perot.

Gargan was replaced as national chairman by Choate, confirming that the Reform Party is now firmly under the control of Perot and Buchanan. Choate immediately downplayed any conflict between Buchanan's extreme-right views on social issues such as abortion and homosexuality and the more libertarian positions previously taken by the Reform Party and Perot personally. “He has a personal belief on the issue of abortion,” Choate said of Buchanan. “We understand where he is, he understands where we are and we accept his position.”

According to Choate, undoubtedly after consulting with Perot, Buchanan was acceptable as a presidential candidate

because he opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization, and backed the Reform Party's position on campaign finance reform. "Because of us, this year there will be a real debate over trade, over globalism, over illegal immigration, over our foreign entanglements and over real political reform," he declared.

The coming together of Perot and Buchanan has sinister implications for American politics, and follows an international pattern, which has seen the emergence of extreme-right-wing demagogues like Austria's Joerg Haider, Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, Preston Manning in Canada and Pauline Hanson in Australia.

Such reactionary political formations have come to the fore within a definite political context. In country after country, the trade unions and the old social democratic and Labor parties have abandoned any struggle in defense of jobs, living standards or social benefits. They have jettisoned their old reformist policies and adapted themselves to the right-wing, "free market" consensus of international capital.

Masses of middle-class and working people find themselves without any representation, even in the most limited form, within the orbit of the traditional bourgeois and social democratic parties. In the absence of a genuine socialist alternative with substantial organizational support among workers, political disorientation prevails within wide layers of the population. In the resulting political vacuum, extreme right-wing elements have been able to seize on social grievances and exploit them, in large measure by scapegoating minorities and immigrants and whipping up nationalism.

Buchanan, a longtime political operative on the right wing of the Republican Party, is seeking to tap into the alienation of broad layers of the US population with the Democrats and Republicans, and build a base for a party even to the right of the Republicans. His alignment with Perot is by no means accidental.

Perot has long had close personal connections to far-right elements, especially those from the milieu of the military and intelligence agencies, going back to his efforts to promote the search for POWs allegedly missing from the Vietnam War. Perot's 1992 and 1996 campaigns were not overtly based on an extreme right program, however. Rather, behind the vague slogan of "reform," they focused on such issues as political corruption and influence peddling in Washington. At the same time, Perot made economic nationalism a centerpiece of his platform, waging a highly-publicized campaign against NAFTA from a protectionist standpoint and winning the support of sections of the trade union bureaucracy.

Perot's United We Stand movement, which became the Reform Party in the 1996 elections, has always represented in embryo a movement of the extreme right. From its origins, the Reform Party was a capitalist party, criticizing the corruption of the Democrats and Republicans and opposing their political monopoly, but offering no substantive programmatic

alternative. Meanwhile, Perot's focus on economic nationalism paved the way for the Reform Party to embrace the American chauvinism and anti-immigrant racism espoused by Buchanan.

In the week before the Nashville meeting Buchanan was noisily parading his right-wing views. He was praised by—and did not disavow—former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, who announced February 6 that he was prepared to quit the Republican Party, where he serves as chairman of the largest congressional district organization in Louisiana, and join the Reform Party in support of Buchanan's candidacy.

Buchanan took the occasion of a campaign appearance in Richmond, Virginia two days later to denounce the diplomatic boycott of Austria in response to the entry of Haider's Freedom Party into the Austrian government. "I do not see any threat to Europe or the world or anywhere from Mr. Haider or that coalition government sitting in Vienna," Buchanan said. "But it is an indication, I think, that any candidate of the right can expect universal hostilities."

Haider has become notorious for his public praise of the "orderly employment policy" of the Nazis and the "courage" and "discipline" of Hitler's Waffen SS (which enlisted many Austrians during World War II). His Freedom Party focuses on opposition to the European Union and scapegoating immigrant workers for the social and economic problems of Austria. To Buchanan, that makes Haider a political soul-mate. "He is an opponent of their whole global new world order," Buchanan said of the Austrian demagogue.

At his February 11 press conference announcing his withdrawal from the Reform Party, Jesse Ventura denounced Buchanan, saying, "I can't stay in a party that will have Pat Buchanan as its nominee and is getting David Duke's support." He called Buchanan an "anti-abortion extremist and unrealistic isolationist." Minnesota Reform Party state chairman Rick McCluhan said he plans to ask the state central committee to call a convention March 4 to vote on disaffiliation from the national party.

But the Minnesota Governor offered no alternative to the ultra-right politics of Buchanan other than lining up behind the Democratic and Republican parties. At his news conference he praised Al Gore's record as vice president, George Bush's record as Texas governor, and John McCain's efforts on campaign finance reform, suggesting that any one of them might get his support for the US presidency.



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