On the eve of the US elections

3 November 2008

In the run-up to Election Day, with polls pointing to a lopsided victory by the Democratic Party, both Barack Obama and leading congressional Democrats are making it clear in advance that a popular repudiation of the Bush administration will not determine the policies of an Obama White House or Democratic Congress.

Having capitalized on popular hatred for President George Bush and mobilized working and young people on the basis of calls for "change" and "new politics" and invocations of the "fierce urgency of now," Obama and the Democratic leadership are taking pains to reassure the ruling elite that if they win the election, they will carry out a thoroughly conventional and conservative agenda that upholds the interests of the financial aristocracy.

The mantra of spokesman after spokesman is that the Democrats should not "overreach," that they should disavow "one-party rule," and that bipartisan consensus should be the goal of the new administration. They are, in other words, repudiating the most fundamental precept of democracy—that the decision made by the voters on Election Day should determine public policy.

Tens of millions of people are going to vote for Obama in the hope that this will lead to a rapid end to the war in Iraq and to domestic policies that promote jobs and decent living standards, as opposed to the unrestrained profiteering by big business and the wealthy fostered by the Bush administration.

The policy of the incoming administration will not be guided by these popular illusions, however, but by the reality of a worldwide financial crisis, a deepening slump in the United States, and the ongoing resistance to imperialist military occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A principal concern of Obama and his key strategists is that a large-scale Democratic victory will arouse popular expectations that they have no intention of meeting.

The disavowal of any political mandate in Tuesday's voting was spelled out by the 2004 Democratic presidential candidate, Senator John Kerry, in an appearance as an Obama surrogate on the NBC Sunday interview program "Meet the Press." Program host Tom Brokaw asked Kerry about statements from House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel, a New York Democrat, that Obama should move rapidly on tax cuts for middle-income and low-income families, health care reform and a substantive program to promote alternative energy.

Asked how he would pay for such policies, Rangel had replied, "Don't ask me where the money will come from. I'm going to go to the same place that Paulson went"—referring to the $700 billion bailout of Wall Street authored by Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson.

Brokaw asked Kerry, "Is that responsible fiscal policy?" The senator responded, "I don't agree with all of that and nor does Barack Obama. Barack Obama is the person running for president and he's made it very clear we're going to have to restore fiscal responsibility to Washington."

Kerry added that Obama would seek significant Republican input and involvement in his administration. "He's going to govern in a way that brings the country together, and no matter what our majority, he's going to seek to reach a broader consensus because that's the only way we can govern America at this time." The senator suggested that the Democrats would not seek to use their majority to push through policies opposed by the Republicans. "We don't need to pass things by 51 votes or 60 votes," he said, referring to the Senate. "We need to build 85-vote majorities."

This statement deserves serious consideration. Insistence on "85-vote majorities" in the Senate means giving the Republican minority veto power over government policy. It amounts to a repudiation of any conception of democracy.

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If the Democrats win on Tuesday, it will be because of broad popular sentiment for a reversal of the policies of war and social reaction pursued for the past eight years by Bush. But Kerry insists that it would be wrong for the Democrats to govern as though they had a mandate.

The anti-democratic character of this stance was underscored as Kerry voiced his agreement with comments by former Democratic Senator Bob Kerrey, who declared recently: “By my lights, the primary threat to the success of a President Obama will come from some Democrats… emboldened by the size of their congressional majority… Obama will need to communicate the following to Congress, in no uncertain terms: The Democrats have not won a mandate for all their policies. Rather, the American people have resoundingly registered their frustration with a failed status quo, and the next president must chart a new, less partisan course.”

Such a position is in stark contrast to the way the Republicans governed after Bush was installed in the White House in 2000 by the Supreme Court. Although Bush had lost the popular vote to his Democratic opponent Al Gore, and the Republicans had far smaller majorities in the House and Senate than the Democrats will enjoy after November 4, the incoming administration boasted that the election had delivered it 100 percent of the power.

Bush proceeded to make policy accordingly, ramming through (with significant Democratic support) massive tax cuts for the wealthy, and then embarking on wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and a host of other policies that were widely opposed by the American public.

Kerry’s remarks are an indication that an incoming Democratic administration will do as the Democrats did after their sweeping victory in the 2006 congressional elections, which was propelled largely by popular hostility to the war in Iraq. The newly installed Democratic majorities in the House and Senate pledged to work with President Bush on a bipartisan basis. The new House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, immediately ruled out any effort to impeach Bush and eventually agreed to continue funding the Iraq war throughout the remainder of Bush’s presidency.

The comments by Kerry and other Democratic spokesmen underscore the essentially fraudulent character of the entire 2008 election. Despite large increases in voter turnout and widespread involvement by new layers of the population, particularly youth and students, the American people will end up serving as little more than extras in a conflict within the ruling elite. Once Election Day is past, Obama will put “hope” and “change” back in his briefcase and go about his real business: defending the interests of corporate America.

The Democrats responded with alacrity to the danger of a meltdown in the financial markets, turning over trillions in public funds to bail out the banks and speculators. The same political figures will turn to working people after the election and tell them that there is no money to provide health care, jobs, education and other social benefits, especially given the need to spend even more for wars in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Patrick Martin

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