Reminiscences of the First Sanders Campaign

written by Eoin McShane | March 14, 2019



The words jumped from the screen like the familiar opines of old love letters.

‘Single-payer healthcare’, ‘break up the banks’, ‘fifteen dollar minimum wage’, ‘tuition free college’.

I had been surreptitiously scrolling through the news on a short break from my daily grind as a graduate-level Civil Servant, and landed upon the headline ‘Bernie Sanders Launches White House Bid’, printed above the iconic image of the disheveled septuagenarian and champion of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party.

Clicking into the article, I was grabbed by the gruff fist of nostalgia, and pulled from my drab office in Dublin back three years to my own small role in the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign of 2016.

At the time, I was living in New York, having just finished an arts degree and struggling, like so many others, to survive on the lowly returns of an American internship.

In an acquiescence to the societal convention that offering cheap labour is a rite of passage, certain to lead to the fruits of eventual gainful employment, I applied for and accepted an internship with a murky ‘Not for Profit’ in Lower Manhattan. Here I was paid $219 dollars a month.

Previously I had always considered myself ‘of the left’, but it was in the heartless cauldron of capitalist America that I decided I was a socialist.

As I began to read into and engage meaningfully with the lives and contributions of a plethora of figures from the American radical tradition, from Henry A. Wallace to Huey P. Newton, my own political reawakening was coinciding with, and ultimately crystallizing around, the unlikely insurgent candidacy of Bernie Sanders.

‘Bernie’ spoke to ideas of economic fairness, wealth inequality and class-based esteem,

substantiated by a suite of progressive policies considered fringe by the standards of America; an average living wage of $15 an hour, campaign finance reform, scrapping the Trans-Pacific Partnership, investing in infrastructure to create middle class jobs, paid parental leave…

Unkempt in appearance and unvarnished in performance, Bernie captured the zeitgeist of a new generation of Americans demanding a different type of politics. While much has been written about the Sanders phenomenon, my experience was that the collective sense of energy and excitement surrounding the ascendant Bernie campaign was, on a personal level, uplifting. Walking around the gentrified enclaves of Bushwick or Williamsburg, and passing café windows displaying faded blue placards stridently declaring 'Sanders 2016', or knowingly nodding at one of the countless young people adorned in 'Feel the Bern' garb, there was a palpable sense of unity and an almost smug appreciation that we, here, in this moment, are on the right side of history and possibly at the start of something transformative.

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It was in the context of this febrile atmosphere that, after one too many Brooklyn Lagers at a 'Sanders 2016' fundraiser, I volunteered to travel on a coach the next day from New York City to Columbia, South Carolina, to canvass voters ahead of the upcoming primary there.

The South Carolina primary was the fourth contest of the election season, and it came on foot of an unexpected string of Sanders triumphs. Against all odds and to the chagrin of the establishment class, Sanders virtually tied the Iowa caucus, the first of the election, and followed this result up with a big victory in New Hampshire. The Sanders campaign was at fever pitch, and naturally determined to consolidate this momentum with a result in South Carolina, the next state to vote. The South Carolina primary was endowed with a further significance, in that it was the first time Bernie's message of economic realignment, so resonant with young and blue collar voters, would be tested amongst a predominantly African American electorate.

And so I found myself standing at the curb of the monstrous Port Authority Bus Station in the dark hours of the following morning, duffel bag slung over shoulder, trying to downplay my Dublin accent in the tentative small talk of strangers. 'Well, I, erm, I'm not actually *American* myself technically, but I'm kind of living here, you know…', I remember offering, as our group of maybe thirty watched a beaten down old brown coach sputter around the corner of 8th Avenue and squeak to a halt in front of us.

This 1980s-era coach – the vehicle of revolution – would be both home and political incubator for the next fifteen hours. Hesitantly at first, then excitedly, our little group shared personal stories of frustration and expectation, as the clunky bus crawled from the iron grip of the city, traversed miles of anonymous New Jersey motorway, and eventually willed itself into the lush wheat farms of Virginia and southwards towards the Carolinas.

While of varying genders and ethnicities, the traveling company were notably young, with one or two exceptions. One such out-lier was Beth, who was eighty-nine, wore dark sunglasses perpetually, and had the sort of waxen, plasticine complexion reminiscent of a long-faded Hollywood star. A veteran of the civil rights movement and many an ill-fated progressive campaign over decades of political activism, Beth was the self-appointed matriarch of the group, who commanded complete admiration and respect. She also took a particular fondness to me. Approaching me with outstretched finger, she beckoned me forward and whispered conspiratorially:

'Brendan Behan.'

I nodded solemnly, and thus our bond was forged.

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Pulling up outside a small one-story home in the suburbs of Columbia –which served as the Sanders campaign headquarters for the entire state – the industrious old bus finally disgorged its bleary-eyed squatters into the balmy South Carolinian morning.

With barely a minute to use the bathroom, we were shepherded into a convoy of awaiting vehicles and ferried to various drop off points around the city of Columbia and its surrounding environs. I was paired with Mariana, a William and Mary graduate of Mexican heritage.

After a short drive we disembarked at a self-contained complex of low apartment blocks, each unit just three stories high, a single abode comprising each story. The blocks, painted a dazzling orange, were repeated in uniform rows, maybe fifty in total, circling around a disused swimming pool. It was unlike any accommodation I had seen before. This was the androgynous housing of South Carolina's suburban working class.

We got to work knocking.

The response was middling. Most people were receptive to the message, but unconvinced of Sanders' ability to actually prevail over Clinton. It was a skepticism which sadly presaged the eventual narrative of Sanders' performance across the South. Nonetheless, there were also genuinely uplifting moments, where a voter would be particularly engaged and on occasion even appear converted. Such little snatches of hope oxygenated the sense that an upset was possible, and buoyed the will to keep going, keep knocking.

There were also many moments of levity, due almost exclusively to the resident's sheer bafflement at the appearance of a slender Irishman peddling the message of democratic socialism at their doorstep. On one occasion I was asked by a middle-aged woman to speak down a telephone to her cousin, just so he could hear me perform a series of arbitrary words and sentences. Leveraging this apparent exoticism, I would incorporate my Irish patois into the pitch: 'I have come all the way from Dublin, Ireland to ask for your vote next Tuesday.'

In all of these hijinks Mariana was the perfect foil, focusing the interaction back onto the issues with empathy and political acuity. I was grateful for her companionship. In between doors she would tell me about growing up as a young ethnic American, and I was reminded of how much higher the stakes of the campaign were for women and men like Mariana, for whom there was no Ireland, imperfect though it is, to eventually return to.

As the sun set over Columbia, we wearily regrouped at campaign HQ and recorded our tallies in a central log book. An impromptu round of applause greeted the realisation that the 89-year-old Beth earned the day's record for most houses canvassed.

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The resolve of the human character to find a pub when in any new environment, whatever the level of tiredness, is apparently a transnational phenomenon. And so, with any notions of sleep promptly shelved, our ragged group set out to locate a boozer. The only watering hole within stumbling distance of the motel was a dank Southern joint with 'Your Sleeping Heart' seeping from the jukebox, complete with four flannel-wearing locals sitting at the bar sipping suds. A stitched sign hanging above them declared, 'Never Mind the Dog, Beware of the Owner', embroidered below the picture of a shotgun. As we burst in the door, boisterous and adorned in Bernie clobber, the barmaid

eyed us silently before eventually declaring, perhaps foreshadowing future electoral realities, ‘I’m sure as hell glad y’all aren’t for Hillary!’ As we exchanged stories and debated ideologies over rounds of offensively cheap Coors, we ended the night swaying arm over shoulder, the Pogues blasting the sanguine cobwebs of Hank Williams from the jukebox.

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The next morning was our final day of campaigning in South Carolina. The experience on this occasion was different from the relative bonhomie of the orange apartment complex. A perceptible sense of unease descended as our car retreated further from the metropolitan centre and beyond the suburbs. Leafing through the clipboard containing the addresses of registered Democrats for the day’s canvassing, I noticed the sheaf was significantly thinner than the previous day.

Mariana and I were deposited on a dirt road, flanked by expansive scorched fields, with little evidence of human activity. Batting away midges in the morning sun as we ambled along, the stillness only punctuated by the bark of a far-off dog, I thought of summers in Kilcar and cousins and endless days of languid exploration.

The first premises we came across was a trailer, ensconced in a large fenced lot, one of many along this road that stretched for miles. It was my first glimpse into the underbelly of America’s working poor, failed by decades of neoliberal governance.

One particularly stark image endures from that day. It is of two trailer homes, both separated by a link fence, practically identical save for a Confederate Flag limply hanging atop one. In the porch of the other sat an African American woman in a wicker chair, as her children played in the lot. It was a blunt reminder of the power of race to distract from an economic system that oppresses all working people.

We returned to the bus that afternoon – our paltry returns recorded in the log book – soberly reminded of the distance left to travel in redressing a system so sickened by the corrupting influence of unbridled capitalism.

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When I reflect on the news that Sanders is running again in 2020 – to ‘finish the job’ he started four years ago – I feel predominantly optimistic. In a crowded field, which is expected to encompass over twenty pretenders to the Democratic candidacy, for me Sanders remains the most ideologically progressive and politically principled of the prospective nominees. He is also the least compromised, in a field which already enumerates leftist charlatans with murky ties to Wall Street cash.

However, my excitement at another Bernie run is tempered with some trepidation. The United States in 2019 is a much changed country to the one I briefly lived in. The energising and ground-breaking electoral success of Democratic women was the talking point of the 2018 primary elections. This trend could herald a more inclusive and diverse political future. There will be those who argue that a younger, possibly female aspirant should carry the progressive flame into 2020.

There is an old adage that ‘you can never step into the same river twice’. It remains to be seen if the Sanders 2020 campaign can ignite a generation of activists in the way its 2016 iteration did. Whatever the case, on this occasion, I will be watcher rather than participator; surreptitiously checking in on events from a drab office in Dublin.