

Portland Press Herald

‘Daring Democracy’ says environmental degradation, racial tension, poverty are intertwined

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May 27th, 2018

We need to act together to face those challenges – and preserve democracy – authors Frances Moore Lappé and Adam Eichen say.

Democracy at state and federal levels is enduring an extended stress test. Maine, under the heavy hand of a domineering governor, now struggles to implement the will of its residents – such as their evident desire to advance solar power.

The derision of democracy is more flagrant in Washington. Self-dealing is rampant in President Trump’s cabinet, as demonstrated by Environmental Protection Agency administrator Scott Pruitt, the poster boy of pay-to-play politics. Despite a furtive leadership style, Pruitt clearly rewards select industrial interests while dismissing the health of American citizens and ecosystems. The subject of 12 federal investigations for questionable management practices, Pruitt routinely disregards democratic norms. Recently, he even attempted to bar several media organizations from a national summit discussing chemical contaminants in drinking water.

In the face of blatant corruption, it’s tempting to turn away from politics. Yet now is when we must “turn to,” working harder than ever to ensure that we don’t lose vital democratic freedoms. That’s the essential message of “Daring Democracy: Igniting Power, Meaning and Connection for the America We Want,” a new book by Frances Moore Lappé (famous for her 1971 bestseller “Diet for a Small Planet”) and Adam Eichen.

Lappé and Eichen see challenges such as environmental degradation, racial tensions and poverty as intertwined, with democratic decision-making the thread binding that web. Sustaining natural ecosystems depends as much on politics as on science.

Without a bedrock commitment to advancing democracy, they caution, “none of our deepest needs or values can be served, nor opportunities seized and threats faced.”

The first half of the book draws heavily on the research of journalist and “Dark Money” author Jane Mayer, illuminating the disproportionate political power of billionaires (with now-familiar names like Koch, DeVos, Olin and Coors) who have worked systematically for decades to both undermine democracy and exploit natural resources for private gain.

Their multi-pronged strategy to delegitimize government, challenge climate science and erode voting rights has included generous funding to academic researchers and think tanks (like the American Enterprise Institute, Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute); commissioned “journalism” (think right-wing radio commentators); subsidized research; distribution of “model

legislation” through groups such as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC); and “astroturf lobbying” (creation of “citizens” groups made to appear like grassroots initiatives but directed by moneyed interests). They’ve effectively established a kind of force field, note researchers Theda Skocpol and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez with [Harvard’s Shifting Trends Project](#), “exerting a strong gravitational pull on many GOP candidates and office-holders.”

The corporate-backed group ALEC, for example, works to squelch local decision-making (such as pesticide ordinances and fracking restrictions) through state-level “preemption laws.” Other initiatives limit voting rights by instituting voter ID requirements (now in 32 states), restricting early voting, reducing polling places and voting hours, eliminating pre-registration of minors and same-day registration, and depriving convicted felons of the right to vote. The impact of these tactics was on display in 2016, particularly in states like Wisconsin where, Lappé and Eichen write, Trump’s “margin of victory was just 27,000 votes, while a federal court confirmed that 300,000 registered voters lacked required voter IDs.”

Policy changes (like the loss of the Fairness Doctrine and adoption of the Telecommunications Act of 1996) have eroded the democratizing power of the free press, leaving fewer and fewer corporations in control of the news. A striking example is the proposed merger of Sinclair Broadcast Group and Tribune Media, which would — for 70 percent of American households — [force “must-run” corporate scripts onto once-local television](#). Sinclair’s media monopoly is already evident in Maine; as of this writing, among 19 listings in the state on a journalism job site, 18 were posted by Sinclair.

Despite these corrosive forces, “Daring Democracy” voices hope for citizen-driven change. In fact, it holds up Maine as an exemplar in the movement to replace “big-donor power with people power.” Lappé and Eichen trace the evolution of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections, which encouraged passage of the pioneering Clean Election Act in 1996 and strengthened it in 2014. As they note, Maine’s public funding for legislative candidates has helped advance progressive environmental legislation measures — like the phase-out of flame retardants and take-back laws for electronics — by moderating the influence of corporate lobbyists.

While acknowledging the imperfect nature of legislative fixes, the authors affirm that public financing of elections is “arguably the most important money-in-politics reform.” In places like Maine where it has taken hold, researchers have found higher voting rates, more diverse candidates, greater numbers of people running for office and a reduced advantage for incumbents.

Lappé and Eisen also hail “the democracy champions of Maine” for adopting ranked-choice voting, helping address “spoiler” concerns by creating a kind of instant runoff if no one receives a majority of first-place votes. Maine is the first state to pioneer this initiative (used in many U.S. cities) and its success could foster greater voter turnout.

Maine’s venture into ranked-choice voting is but one way to advance democracy. “Daring Democracy” encourages citizens to take many actions, like registering voters, advocating for net neutrality and working to regulate online political advertising and data gathering. Those in search of further ideas can review their online [“Field Guide to the Democracy Movement.”](#)

Optimism is not required, Lappé and Eisen argue, but courage is. The antidote to “a self-reinforcing spiral of powerlessness,” they write, is “meaningful action we take together.”