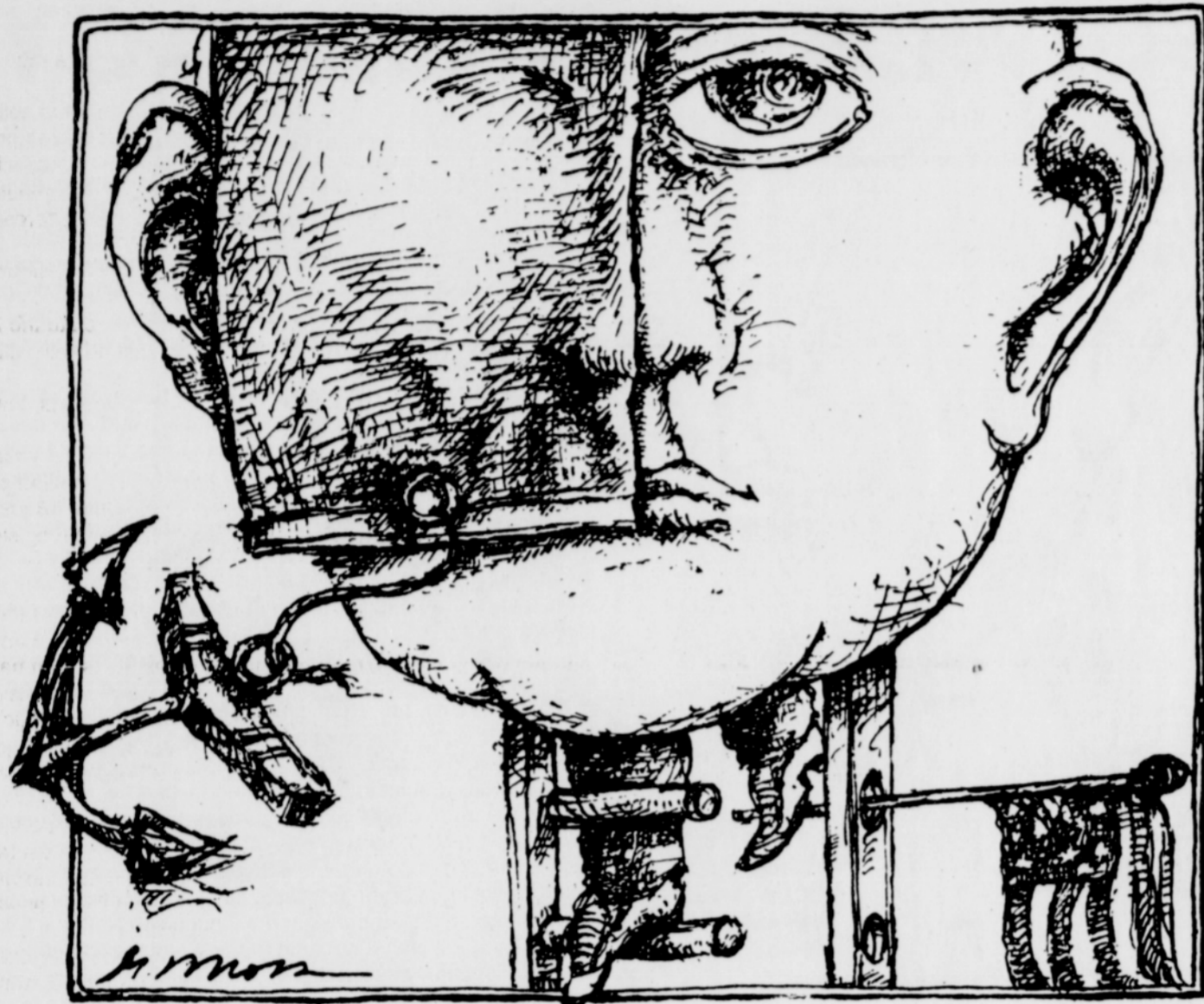


# 50 WAYS TO GET POLITICAL



GERALD MOSS

BY THE EDITORS OF 'IN CONTEXT' MAGAZINE

"Civilization is not natural," Bill Moyers wrote. "It is an accomplishment of politics and culture. It is not just what happens; it is what we make happen." In some ways, to suggest that we must get political is inaccurate. Politics is simply collective decision making, something we make happen every day. But there are always more and more effective ways to play. Use this list as a brainstorming tool to improve the quality of your own public life, and share it with your friends.

- 1 Vote. People have sacrificed their lives for the right to vote, yet in the USA, fewer of us do every year. Voting is your hard-earned right and your official voice.
- 2 Don't vote — and let people know why. If you feel strongly that you have no genuine choices or that the system is broken beyond repair, then say so. But speak up about it; don't just let it slide.
- 3 Register people to vote. One reason the political game's gone sour is that too few of us play. Many of the non-players are on the low end of the economic ladder. Sign them up — they have important things to contribute.
- 4 Vote with your dollars. Buy selectively! Boycott companies or products that violate your principles, and write those companies to tell them what changes you think they should make. Then buy what you need from companies that are socially responsible. (See *Shopping for a Better World*, published by the Council on Economic Priorities.)
- 5 Travel. Get some first hand experience in how things happen in other places, and bring home some questions about how you do things at home.
- 6 Don't travel. Travel wastes energy and your troubles come with you. Stay home and concentrate on improving your community.
- 7 Grow a garden (or support local growers). It makes you less dependent on agribusiness, and more aware of your dependence on — and relationship with — the Earth.
- 8 Recycle. First reduce consumption, then reuse what you can. Recycle everything possible of what's left. Promote this practice in your community and workplace. Besides voting, recycling is currently one of the few ways we participate in public life on a mass scale voluntarily.
- 9 Write letters to the editor. Published they can change minds, and even unpublished, they impact the newspaper. (See sidebar.)
- 10 Write a song. Political songs are great tools for organizing and inspiring people. Where would the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements of the 1960s have been without the music?
- 11 Learn about unions. If you don't belong to one, get someone who does to explain their purpose, history, and current status. Unions are where many of the most important political battles of our era were fought — and often won.
- 12 Get to know your neighbors. It's hard to reclaim politics without some sense of community. Once you know and trust each other maybe you could even talk politics.
- 13 Start political conversations. You can do this anywhere, with anyone. Talking politics (and listening) is critical for a vibrant democracy. Start with a question: "So what do you think about..."
- 14 Make friends with someone of another race, ethnicity, age, ability, gender or sexual preference. Ask questions, and learn to listen to the answers.
- 15 Learn another language. This will expand your political (and cultural) horizons in manifold and unexpected ways.
- 16 Teach someone to read. Politics is a dialogue, and those who can't read can't participate as fully or as easily.
- 17 Mount a "slow streets" campaign. Downtown pedestrian malls and low speed limits mean more pedestrian traffic, which means more personal interaction, which can support development of a true civil society. It won't happen if we're all driving around fast in metal boxes.
- 18 Ride a bike. You'll get healthier, make a statement, and add yourself to the constituency of cyclists calling for slow streets and bike trails.
- 19 Call a radio talk-show. The good ones are often the town meetings of the airwaves. Talkshow hosts (the good ones) will especially appreciate you if you talk common sense about a currently divisive topic.

- 20 Buy produce at a farmers' market. If your community doesn't have one, get one started.
- 21 Be eco-wise. Compost, save water, conserve energy, car pool — all of these contribute to the public good and model good behavior, and also shift the political center of gravity in a green direction.
- 22 Correspond with someone in prison. The United States imprisons a larger share of its population (0.4%) than any other nation. More than one million Americans are in jail, either awaiting trial or serving time. Yet prison is one of the political institutions some people say we need more of. Get to know more about it and see whether you agree.
- 23 Join a study circle. Self-education is a fast track to political empowerment. Pick an issue you care about, hook up with some friends who feel likewise, and start reading, thinking and talking about it. If you then come up with some better ideas than the people currently holding the levers of power and your plans are adopted it won't be the first time such things have happened.
- 24 Carry a camera. Amateur video and photographic records can shine light on an issue, sometimes raising it to national prominence overnight.
- 25 Adopt a creek (or a tree, or a hillside, or...). Learn to care for it, learn everything you can about it, and we guarantee it will heighten your political sensibilities.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Writing a letter to the editor is a wonderfully effective way of reaching thousands of newspaper readers about almost any political issue. Equally important, politicians keep a close watch on letters to the editor to monitor public opinion, and this directly affects the actions they will take. Furthermore, each newspaper gauges its readership's interest in various topics by reviewing letters to the editor, including those it does not print, and this, over time, affects what topics the newspaper actually covers. Editorial boards in particular keep a close watch on letters to the editor in determining topics on which to editorialize, and letters referring to current printed editorials are especially noted to sense the climate of public opinion.

We've made the point that letters don't have to be published to have an effect. Still, publication is best and certainly reaches the maximum number of people. Here are a few rules to help assure that your letter will be selected:

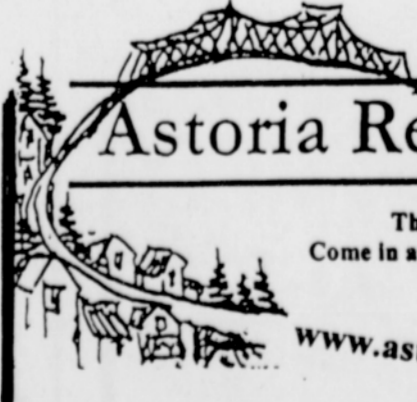
- ~Use a hook. Always refer to and comment on an article or editorial that already appeared in the paper.
  - ~Keep it short. Look at the letters published in the newspaper to which you're writing and stay within that length.
  - ~Be emotive. Show that you care about and believe in what you're writing. If you're moved or angry, get that on paper. Being funny, while harder to do, is also a big plus.
  - ~Have a clear point and make it. Have someone else read your letter to check you on this one.
  - ~Include an interesting fact or argument. Pick one that may be new to readers. The provocative and/or controversial is by no means out of the question.
  - ~Be legible, and include your name, address and phone number to enable editors to verify your letter. Your letter should be mailed to "Letters to the Editor" at your newspaper's address. National newspapers or national, regional or local magazines are fair game too, just remember you have to have a hook — some reference to an item previously published.
- If you can get some friends to write to the same paper you have on the same subject, especially if this occurs over time with increasing numbers, it looks to the editors like a movement is emerging. And it is!

~CARLA COLE

Carla Cole wrote this for *IN CONTEXT*. She adapted it from educational material produced by RESULTS, a hunger lobbying group.

- 26 Promote military conversion campaigns. The fact a sizable portion of our economy is dedicated to the technology of killing contributes to a political climate that tolerates war. Support efforts to wean industry away from the military.
- 27 Run for elective office. Attend meetings of local government city council, school board, park district, whatever — to learn how they work and be a voice for reasoned sanity and balance. Then run for office, or volunteer for appointment to an advisory council. The "system" really is a product of the individuals who participate in it.
- 28 Support campaign reform. This is a must. Anything that elevates the quality of political dialogue above the level of "soundbite" and reduces campaign dependence on big money will help people to reclaim politics.
- 29 Start a shadow government. If you're thoroughly disgusted with the decisions of your legislature or city council, start your own! Your mock resolutions won't have the rule of law, but they will help you articulate your concerns and values — and you might draw some media attention to your point of view.
- 30 Be a media guerrilla. Use fax, E-mail, photocopies, T-shirts, newsletters, bumperstickers or whatever to broadcast the message of your choice. Spread empowering information!
- 31 Buy third-world products. Especially those produced by small family-owned businesses and co-ops.
- 32 Don't buy third-world products. Especially plantation crops like coffee, cocoa and bananas that displace food production for local people, unless you know they were bought directly from small farmers.
- 33 Spend less money. The less you spend, the less you need to make and the more time you have available to talk, read, campaign, etc.
- 34 Earn less money. The less you earn, the lower your tax rate, and the less you support things like political corruption and nuclear weapons programs.
- 35 Earn a lot less money. Many people arrange their lives so that they can live simply and pay no taxes at all, which has obvious political advantages (but might not endear you to taxpayers).
- 36 Earn more money — but live simply and give away the surplus cash to efforts to promote a sane and livable world.
- 37 Give away your inheritance. If you come into money, use it to support efforts to create change for the better. Or invest your money, live off the interest, and devote yourself to volunteer work.
- 38 Reclaim your inheritance. National forests, the airwaves, public parks — all of these belong to you. What would you like to do with them?
- 39 Use a condom. For lots of reasons. Protecting yourself from AIDS, reducing population, and reducing the chances of an unwanted birth are all profoundly political acts.
- 40 Adopt a politician. Write a monthly letter to your Representative, Senator or President. Invite a schoolboard member to lunch. Sometimes making friends is the most politically effective thing you can do.
- 41 Eat lower on the food chain. Food is the most under recognized confluence of the personal and political. Eating less meat will positively impact everything from your health to public land management.
- 42 Fly an Earth Flag. National borders are human inventions, but the planet isn't. Pledge yourself to the service of your planet, bioregion, and community.
- 43 Write to foreign governments. Let them know that you care about what they do, and hold them to the same standards of human decency as you would hold their own government.
- 44 Write to your own government. Let them know you care about what they do, and hold them to the same standards of human decency as you would a foreign government.
- 45 Get rid of your television set. Spend the time you save on political activities. This is easily the most radical item on the list, as it involves permanently unplugging yourself from the national propaganda machine we call advertising.
- 46 Watch television — critically. If you don't want to pull the plug (or want to plug back in), tune in with discrimination. You can learn wonderful things from TV and use it as a tool for political education, or you can pollute your brain and get drowned in propaganda. It's up to you.
- 47 Buy a share of stock. This entitles you to attend a company's annual meeting of stockholders, vote and voice your opinion. Praise or chastise the company's directors, as appropriate.
- 48 Don't get mad, get involved. If you don't like something, work with others to try to change it. If you can't change the big things, change the small ones. Politics is not someone or something "out there" — it's something we create together.
- 49 Expect success. When you approach a problem expecting failure or defeat, you will be defensive, and that is more likely to generate opposition than if you demonstrate an expectation of cooperative problem-solving.
- 50 Don't worry, be happy. No, we're not kidding. *Worry* comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word meaning to choke, strangle, injure, or violate. Worrying doesn't do much political good. *Happy* — which comes from the same root as "happen" — is a state of mind. It's not about denying our problems, but deciding to do something about them with a creative mind, a compassionate heart and a courageous spirit. Easy choice, right?

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