

The Sanders Record

The Vermont senator has been true to his principles throughout his life – unfortunately.

by Conrad Black



It is timely to look more closely at Senator Bernie Sanders. He is 78, was born and raised in Brooklyn in a Jewish family; his antecedents on both sides came from Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (now part of Poland). His father emigrated to New York in 1921 some years after Sanders's mother's family. An older brother, Larry, lives in England and was a Green Party city councilor in Oxford (he and I were opponents in a debate in 2016 in London about the U.S. election, and he was amiable and soft-spoken – none of Bernie's arm-waving and shouting). Sanders was a capable athlete in his early years but an indifferent student. He took a B.A. in political science at the University of Chicago in 1964 and was an active member of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and helped agitate successfully against segregated residences at the university.

He attended the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Martin Luther King gave his memorable "I Have a Dream" speech. Sanders was also an anti-war activist, but no more militant or demonstrative, as far as can be seen, than was Bill Clinton. He was a member of the Student Peace Union, and after the Vietnam War began, he sought status as a conscientious objector. This was denied, but only after the draft calls had settled on younger men.

He returned to New York City and worked as a substitute teacher in the Head Start program, a psychiatric aide, and a carpenter. Then in 1968 he moved to Stannard, Vt., population 88, in a Thoreau-esque gesture of integrality with nature and rural living. With his small inheritance, he bought a cabin with a dirt floor and very crude plumbing, and he paid the bills by being a carpenter, though his chief occupation was making what he has called "radical film strips" for educational use. His first marriage, in these bucolic conditions, lasted only two years.

Sanders began his long career in third-party left-wing politics in a mélange of left-wing causes called the Liberty Union Party. Under this banner, Sanders was a candidate for governor of Vermont in 1972 and 1976, and for the U.S. Senate in a 1972 special election and in 1974, taking 4 percent of the statewide vote in the second Senate contest, against Patrick Leahy, now in his eighth term. Sanders increased his vote total to about 8 percent (11,000 votes) running for governor in 1976, but the Liberty Union Party then dissolved. The next year Sanders, now 36 and still a part-time carpenter, became the director of the leftist American People's Historical Society, in which capacity he produced a 30-minute documentary lionizing Eugene V. Debs — a five-time Socialist candidate for president who won 900,000 votes (6 percent) in the famous 1912 election of three presidents against Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, and William Howard Taft. Wilson incarcerated Debs for sedition during World War I for

recommending non-compliance with the military draft (he would later be pardoned by President Warren Harding).

Sanders gained steady employment for the first time when he was elected mayor of Burlington, Vt., by ten votes in 1981, at the head of a coalition of leftist civic-action groups against a five-term Democrat who was tacitly endorsed by the Republicans as well. Sanders accused him of being a patronage-tainted stooge of local developers. As mayor, Sanders balanced the municipal budget, attracted a minor-league baseball team (it was called the Vermont Reds not because of Sanders, but because it was a farm team of the Cincinnati Reds). He was a pioneer in community-trust housing, sued to reduce local cable-television rates, and championed an imaginative multi-use redevelopment plan for the city's Lake Champlain waterfront; his slogan was "Burlington is not for sale." He worked well with all groups (except some developers) and showed no signs of the authoritarianism of the doctrinaire Left, though he admired some of their most odious exemplars, such as Fidel Castro, whom he unsuccessfully tried to visit. He was reelected three times as a declared socialist, with his vote inching up above 55 percent in 1987, and he had another try at the governor's chair in 1986, but got only 14 percent of the vote. By this time Sanders was already focused on national government and had invited leftist professor and eminent linguist Noam Chomsky to give a speech in 1985 denouncing American foreign policy. He retired as mayor in 1989 and became a lecturer at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard in 1989 and at Hamilton College in 1991.

In 1988, Sanders ran again as an independent for statewide office, as congressman at large for Vermont, and gained 38 percent of the vote, double the vote for the Democratic candidate, and within three points of the winner, Republican Peter Smith. Two years later, he ran again as an independent, but without a Democrat in the race, and this time he entered Congress, aged 50, as a Democratic-left independent fusion

candidate. He served eight consecutive terms as a congressman and then in 2006 won the first of three terms (so far) as U.S. senator. It was unjust for Michael Bloomberg to suggest that Sanders was a Communist, as he does believe in free elections. He has stuck to his platform and doggedly fought out his career at the polls through 20 elections between 1972 and 2018, 16 of them statewide, albeit in a small state. It is correct, but unsurprising given that he sat as a socialist in the Senate, to say that he has introduced 364 bills as a senator, of which only three have passed, and two of them were to name post offices.

Bernie Sanders believes in mobilizing the less advantaged 50.1 percent of the voters in America, as in Vermont and in Burlington, by promising them a sufficient share of the wealth and status of the upper 49.9 percent of society, while assuaging any reservations about confiscating the wealth and income of others by denouncing the system and representing such redistribution as fairness. He wants an environmental revolution, no doubt to reduce pollution as a side benefit, but more importantly as a planet-saving cover for his assault on capitalism and his acquisition of the votes of the relatively disadvantaged. He is making a direct appeal to a majority of Americans by promising them economic benefits wrenched from the hands of the greedy 49.9 percent, or benignly showered upon them by a kindly state, as if the state got its money from anyone but its constituents.

The key to repulsing Sanders lies in three responses: First, publicization, as has already begun, of the many colossal indiscretions in his lengthy public record, including his exaggerated claim that the U.S. is "systemically racist" and reflections published in an "alternative" newspaper on the alleged propensity of women to fantasize about rape. Second is fanning the well-entrenched negative American response to the idea of socialism as coercive and anti-individualistic, amounting to Communism with less severity, at least initially.

Finally, Sanders's opponent, Bloomberg (and if he can't do it, Trump), starts with the 49.9 percent who are losers in the Sanders transformation and then scoops up at least a third of Sanders's targeted voters by pitching to their not unreasonable faith in their ability to get into the upper half without having to float upwards because of exorbitant government extractions and reallocations.

Obviously, Sanders must lose, if not at the convention, then in November. If Sanders is nominated, Trump will take about 65 percent of the vote, the highest percentage for a candidate in a contested U.S. presidential election in 200 years, and will win every state (including Vermont), and roll up a margin of about twice Richard Nixon's outstanding record of 18 million votes over George McGovern in 1972 (with only about 55 percent of the number of voters anticipated this year). In such a tidal wave, Trump's coattails would be long and would install a heavy Republican majority in both houses of Congress. This is why the Democratic elders are frazzled by the prospect of a Sanders candidacy. Michael Bloomberg, who is not otherwise any more beloved a candidate to them than Trump was to the Bush-Romney-McCain Republicans four years ago, is now the anointed savior of some post-electoral standing for the Democrats. Never in American history has a political leader achieved so swift a transition from a side-splitting joke to his opponents, as Trump was a little over three years ago, to the subject of their cold, gripping terror, of such enormity as only the impending loss of control of a vast apparatus of government and media influence can induce.

The Democrats now face a choice of sinking with all hands with Sanders or being badly shot up and limping home, waterlogged and well down in the water with all hands at the pumps, which is the best the brazen and clumsy Bloomberg takeover can now realistically have as its objective.