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One-Man Show: What Happens If Senator Bernie Sanders Runs for The Presidency?

By Greg Guma
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If no one is addressing the central issues of our time in the run up to 2016, US Senator Bernie Sanders says that he may run for US president. "Obviously if I did not think I had a reasonable chance to win I wouldn't run," he recently told Politico. On the other hand, if other candidates aren't talking enough about the issues that matter to him – he mentioned mainly domestic questions, including the collapse of the middle class, growing wealth and income inequality, growth in poverty, and what he calls "global warming" — the 72-year-old career politician says, "well, then maybe I have to do it."

Conveniently, a run in 2016 would not require Sanders to surrender his Senate seat. He isn't up for reelection until 2018.

Sanders and Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin welcome Sandia to Vermont

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This isn't Sanders' first long-shot run, nor his first campaign against a woman seeking high office. In 2016 his opponent may well be Hillary Clinton. Although Sanders has effectively ruled out a race against first-term Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, the former First Lady and Secretary of State gets no such pass.

He may even enter the Democratic primaries to do it, his first ever entry into a major party race after decades of denouncing them. "It's not my intention to be some kind of spoiler and play the role of just draining votes away to allow my voice to be heard," he explained. "And there are ways that you can do that, whether one runs as an independent, whether one runs within the Democratic primary system."

To understand how this could turn out, it's useful to look back at his 1986 run for Vermont governor. Whether that race – against the state's first female chief executive – was ever winnable is hard to say. Nevertheless, after two terms as Burlington mayor Sanders went up

against Madeleine May Kunin, an attractive Swiss immigrant who had come to the state with her brother in 1957 and carved out a niche in state politics as a strong chairperson of the House Appropriations Committee.

In 1978 Kunin defeated Peter Smith, Vermont's Republican version of Robert Redford, to become lieutenant governor. After four years in the shadow of Republican Governor Richard she challenged him but lost in a 1982 gubernatorial run. However, Kunin excelled at setting goals and building a personal organization. In the 1984 race, with Snelling temporarily retired, she squeaked into office and finally cracked the state's glass ceiling.

A moderate Democrat, Kunin favored social programs but fiscal conservatism. Though criticized as equivocal on feminist and labor issues, she nevertheless used her success to bring more women into state government and prove, as Sanders had in Burlington, that being "different" did not mean she wasn't competent. When it came to keeping the state in sound financial shape or protecting water quality, Kunin could be as strict as Snelling.

On the other hand, she shied away from raising the minimum wage or demanding that corporations give notice before closing down plants. She wanted the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Plant to be safe but didn't think it should be shut down "overnight."

"If you ask her where she stands," said Sanders during his campaign, "she'd say, in the middle of the Democratic Party. She's never said she'd do anything. The confusion lies in the fact that many people are excited because she's the first woman governor. But after that there ain't much."

Kunin wasn't much more kind. "I think he has messianic tendencies," she told James Ridgeway, who covered the campaign for The Village Voice.

> "That's not uncommon in politicians. But it does mean he dismisses everyone else's alternative solutions...His approach is always to tear down... A lot of what he says in rhetoric and undoable... He has to create a distinction between us, and to do that he has to push me more to the right, where I really don't think I am. I don't think it's fair. He's not running against evil, you know."

The third player in this drama, Peter Smith, had some kind words for Kunin. "She's a good person," he said. "She's got some commitment." But he also said that she was a case of "vision without substance." In Sanders, Smith saw passion, confusion and noise. "If Bernie were as gutsy and honest as he says he is, he'd run as a Socialist. He is a socialist! That's why he went to Nicaragua."

Journalist Peter Freyne conferred nicknames on all three in his popular weekly column – Queen Madeleine, Preppie Peter and Lord Bernie – apt descriptions of Vermont's emerging political royalty. Each was a political star with a proven popular base. But Sanders' early boast that he was "running to win" had to be revised by his campaign organizers. A July poll put the Lord at a mere 11 percent statewide, while the Queen had 53, well outdistancing Preppie.

By October the Sanders campaign, if not the candidate himself, had lowered its sights to a respectable 20 percent. Within his campaign organization feelings were frayed and hopes disappointed. It had not become the grassroots uprising they expected. More than a few activists and contributors who had helped in previous campaigns felt it was the wrong race

at the wrong time. Others wanted Sanders to focus on Burlington and consolidate the local movement.
Ellen David-Friedman, who managed the campaign for several months, compared Bernie to Jesse Jackson "in terms of focusing more on a candidacy and less on an organization." She supported him but questioned his resistance to accountability.

Anarchist thinker Murray Bookchin, who lived in Burlington, was more blunt. "Bernie's running a one-man show," he charged.

> "The only justification for a socialist campaign at this point is to try to educate people, and Sanders isn't doing that at all. Instead, he's running on the preposterous notion that he can get elected as governor this year."

At this point much the same thing could be said about Sanders' presidential plans.

In 2004, Ralph Nader, 74 years old at the time and running for president for the fifth time, argued that if he did not step in the Republican and Democratic candidates wouldn't move their platforms toward talking about his issues – corporate control, livable wages and consumer protection. But that didn't happen. Rather than pushing Kerry to the left, Nader's run that year prompted Democrats to push back.

In the end, Nader didn't get the chance to participate in the presidential debates and had no visible impact on the campaign. Even though he was on the ballot in 34 states — a high bar that Sanders will have difficulty matching — Nader received less than half a million votes, a mere 0.4 percent. Four years earlier, his personal best was close to three million votes.

Like Nader in 2004, Sanders ran on a substantive platform in 1986: less reliance on the property tax, a more progressive income and corporate tax system, lower utility bills, a higher minimum wage and phasing out Vermont Yankee. But neither his program nor speaking gifts were enough to overcome the obstacles. His opponents could vastly outspend him and his own ranks were split.

Combining forces with US Senator Patrick Leahy, Governor Kunin staged an impressive get-out-the-vote effort, the most sophisticated voter identification program in state history. Expect Leahy and other prominent Democrats to stick with just about anyone over Sanders in 2016. In 1986, unemployment in Vermont was at a record low and there was no state deficit, so Kunin also had economics of her side. On Election Day she didn't crack the 50 percent mark. But she left her opponents well behind.

Sanders came away with 15 percent, considerably less than he predicted. What he had done, however, was to plant his flag as an independent force. It wasn't simply the size of the vote that impressed people, but the fact that much of it came from farm communities and conservative hill towns, usually Republican strongholds. In fact, Sanders won his highest percentage in the conservative Northeast Kingdom.

Stalwart left-leaning supporters did learn some tough lessons. Sanders' unilateral decision-making and failure to build trust among his allies made fundraising and organizing difficult. His natural constituencies – the independent Left, progressive Democrats, union workers and low income groups – were generally unenthusiastic. Even members of his own coalition were guarded. Support from women's groups and labor was limited.

To be sure, Sanders was a serious presence in the race, exerting a leftward pressure on discussions. Yet the campaign also accentuated the strains developing in the state's left-liberal alliance. As David-Friedman said afterward, Sanders for Governor "did not ignite, but neither was it ignored."

By the end of the 1980s, the idea that Vermont's Left might one day "take over" the state was no longer some far-fetched fantasy. However, it was not actually the Left, it was Sanders who had positioned himself for victory. Party loyalty had been dropping for more than a decade. Up to 40 percent of state voters considered themselves independents. Many people crossed party lines to vote for the most likeable, trustworthy or competent person in a race.

Sanders profited from these shifting realities of electoral life. Like many successful politicians, he had become an institution, able to command respect and votes without tying himself to any concrete program or organization. For almost any other leftist the run against Kunin would have been a disaster. But Sanders managed to pull a decent vote without solid organizational support. No progressive candidate for governor broke his record until Anthony Pollina, also running as an Independent, challenged Republican incumbent Jim Douglas 22 years later.

For Rainbow Coalition activists who stuck with Sanders, the 1986 governor's race was a trying experience that demonstrated his preference for winning votes over organizing a movement. But that did not prevent him from returning two years later. Without party backing he raised about $300,000, dominated the debate, eclipsed Democrat Paul Poirier, and came within 3 percent of winning. Although Republican Peter Smith took that race, Sanders returned two years later and defeated him.

Once in Congress, Sanders remained there for more than two decades. In Vermont, a Progressive Party was formed, largely without his support, but has lost power in Burlington in recent years. It's most prominent politicians need the Democratic Party's endorsement to win legislative seats.

Throughout the 1980s, Sanders frequently handed Democrats demoralizing defeats. But the real challenge that faced Vermont Democrats was never a statewide Progressive party, but rather a permanent campaign machine. For all Sanders' talk about the need for an alternative to the two-party system, he did little except make himself the de facto head of whatever emerged.

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