

Lee Webb

Interview by Pierre Clavel

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PC: Could you give a history of what you were doing and how you came to start the Conference. And then later I will ask what you thought was the course of development of the conference while you were there, and after that a little on what happened afterwards...

LW: I was born in Brookline Massachusetts in 1941. My mother from Bath and Augusta Maine, and my father was from Salem, Massachusetts. I went to Brookline grammar schools and then my mother – I'd say we were lower middle class – my mother heard that people could get scholarships to boarding schools. She had me apply to Andover and Exeter and I was admitted to Andover and I got a full scholarship for four years. And then I went to Boston University. I selected that rather than Tufts or Brandeis or Harvard because I didn't feel that I was doing as well as I could at Phillips, which had kids who were far wealthier than I was.

PC: What year was that?

LW: Fifty five to fifty nine. So I went to BU, and very quickly I got involved in – I was going into English Literature, to be a writer—but quickly I got involved in the support group for the North Carolina sit-ins. I can't remember the dates, but it was my freshman year or my sophomore year. So I became active in that, and then in the nuclear disarmament efforts, and started working with students all over metropolitan Boston, on disarmament efforts; and could have gone into political science, sociology. Though my degree turned out to be in Philosophy. And then I heard Tom Hayden give a speech at the Harvard Divinity School, a group of ten or twelve of us, became sort of a Boston area group for SDS. It was really a profoundly intellectual and academic experience. SDS at that time was probably more graduate students and academic, sort of C. Wright Mills kind of involved academics. Didn't actually do anything. Debated, discussed, educated, talked, and it was just an exciting intellectual community to be involved with.

PC: So you were in college like 59 to 63?

LW: That's right. I ran into SDS in 63 – right after Port Huron. Then I became the National Secretary of SDS, left right after graduation and tried very hard to redirect SDS away from what I thought was sort of the dominant view of the time which was SDS as sort of the think tank of the student movement, and the civil rights movement and the peace movement, sort of the intellectual advisors to other people. And push them to take seriously being a membership organization. And force SDS to create real chapters that engage in activities. And we worked a lot on in loco parentis, and free speech – free speech had a much narrower definition back then – And on civil rights, non-discrimination, open discussion, and we were very involved with the National Student Association in terms of operating ...

PC: We were just talking about you trying to redirect the focus of SDS

LW: Into a more active organization. And at that time at least at the national level we saw ourselves as sort of the head of the liberal caucus of the national Student Association and then as advisors to SNC, the northern student movement, peace and other organizations.

When I was elected National Secretary, SDS elected a national council that a bunch of people remarked at the conference -- this was the first time in 40 or 50 year that a national progressive organization had a majority of non-Jews. And Steve Max had mentioned how important that development was.

So, I did that for a year . Then I moved to Chicago because I was a conscientious objector I went to work for the National Urban Coalition – it was a project of the National Conference of Churches – the Urban Training Center for Christian Missions. A project of the National Conference of Churches to train ministers, the urban ministry. And while I was there we moved the SDS headquarters out to Chicago. I was a member of the national administrative committee for two or three years – 64-65 – and trying to keep – by this time SDS had become a national membership organization, and the organization was exploding in terms of its growth and all sorts of people were coming into it primarily because of their frustrations because of the war. Every time Johnson announced another increase in the number of soldiers sent to Vietnam, the SDS chapters on various campuses grew by 20 or 30 or 40 or 50 percent and became much more militant. And it became very, very hard to maintain the organization on a track that wasn't just militant and hostile to the government as possible. And so I was one of the people referred to as the old guard. I tried to prevent those developments. I then became a Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies in Washington and moved down there for a couple of years and went to work as an editor for Ramparts and did that for a while. But Washington was really under Nixon right now, -- 68 – it was like a city under siege. I don't know where it came from, whether it was coming from New England, whether it was SDS – you know our focus on human freedom. We longed to become part of a democracy again, longed to be a citizen. And I got a call from a friend who was teaching at Goddard College, -- I'd gotten married in Washington, to Marilyn Saltzman, and we moved to Vermont with our young daughter – 35 years old now, very successful businesswoman – and I started to teach.

I had a transforming experience in Vermont. I organized a rally against the Vietnam war on the steps of the state capital. We had a couple of hundred people. You know and I was waiting for the state police, I was waiting for a strong reaction. It was sort of a wet day. I was sort of shouting on the big steps of the state capital, and this guy came out and he said, "Would you like a microphone?" And I said, "Yes.." My first thought was that this is a plot. And it turned out this was the Sergeant at Arms of the Legislature, who brought me inside, and he gave us an extension cord, and a microphone; and so – I can't remember what our demand was, we demanded that we meet with the legislature, and thinking that that was going to be the end of it. Because obviously they weren't going to talk to us. Well, I spoke to the Sergeant at Arms, said we want to talk to the legislature. Ten minutes later he said, "Well the speaker of the house will be happy to meet with

you.” And so I went in and he said, “What can I do for you?” I said well, we’d like to have the State Legislature take a position against the Vietnam War. And he said “Well, I’m a supporter of the Vietnam War, but there are some people in here who are opponents of the war, so what would you like us to do? Do you have a copy of a resolution?” I gave him the resolution, and he said “OK, there is a meeting of the Military and Civil Affairs Committee going on in about an hour – Would you come to that meeting?” And I thought he was blowing smoke. But I went to the meeting and the Military and Civil Affairs Council, a lot of people spoke in favor of the war, a number of people spoke against. But the Speaker said “The state is very divided on this question, our senator doesn’t think it’s such a great war, I think we have an obligation to bring this to the floor of the House. So Military and Civil Affairs passed the thing, and sent it to the floor. And four days later, one evening, the Vermont legislature met – the big entertainment in Montpelier in the winter is the legislature being in session; the state capitol on the hill, brightly lit, and people flocked to the public hearing, because there was a lot of interesting stuff going on. So in this case it was in the floor of the legislature, and in Vermont when the legislature is in session the men wearing coats and ties, the women in dresses, and everybody has to be sitting in their seats. We brought this up, and there was a two and a half hour debate, on the Vietnam war. This is from my experience in Washington. I had just left Washington eight or nine months or maybe a year earlier. And they debated it, and the press corps was entranced with what was going on. The legislature defeated it, 77 to 52 or something like that. But it was 52 more votes than ..

I became very responsive to, very interested in Montpelier. There had been a bunch of advocacy groups that had grown up – the Vermont Public Interest Research Group, was one of them. Vermont Tomorrow which was an environmental organization; there were two or three others. And I started to work with the public Interest Research Group, and a group of legislators that I had originally met during this debate about the Vietnam war. And it turned out that more of the people I worked with were people who had opposed my resolution and supported the war, but they were ...democrats from Burlington. And so we started to work on economic issues. And I was marginal to it, but I was helpful in passing a bill in Vermont that put a capital gains tax on land speculation. That if you buy and sell property within six months the state tax on that transaction was a hundred percent, going down to nothing at the end of ten years. It was really aimed a people who were buying and selling dairy farms and subdividing them and so on.

And I helped to write – and this took a long time – the first lifeline electric rate bill in the country. And lobbied that through the legislature. It took a long time, but there it is, successful. And then we were looking for something the next year, and I remember running into somebody in Hardwick, who told me he had just graduated from Hardwick High School, and it was a friend of this person who had moved up to be in a commune in Maine. And he said this friend of theirs had just graduated from high school and his parents had given a graduation present for all of his teeth to be removed, and how that was very common, and that was because kids’ teeth were so terrible, and they were a constant problem for the rest of their life. And getting their teeth removed and false teeth was a way of really helping a kid get a start in the world. And so I started to talk to our friends in Montpelier about this, and so we came up with a bill that would give dental

care to kids below six years old, paid for by the state, where the state reimbursement being on a sliding scale, and that is if your income was below \$15,000 the state would pay 100 percent. But we decided that to really make it on a sliding scale because we – I certainly was not enamored with the National Welfare Rights Organization and everybody focusing just on poor people; that there were an awful lot of people who weren't poor but who had problems. This was a lot of money at that time. I think that if you were making \$30,000 a year the state would still pay five percent of your kid's dental bill. So we were able to argue that this was going to help 85 percent of the people in Maine; and it was paid for by a tax of candy and vending machines. You know, we got the low income alliance, and we got this group and that group – and we got the dentists. At one point we went to see the governor, and the governor attacked us on two grounds. First of all, he says, "Who the hell do you think you are, the tooth fairy?" So we called it the "tooth fairy bill." And the second thing was he attacked us as do-gooders. So we promptly organized a basketball team called the do-gooders, and challenged the governor's team. But it passed the house 140 to 1 – this one legislator said "I couldn't go home tonight and tell my kind I voted against the tooth fairy."

So in the process of this, the local paper, the Montpelier Times-Argus and the Rutland Herald – really very good papers, and they covered this stuff extensively – and it started to appear in the Boston Globe, and sometimes in the New York Times. And so I started to get calls or letters, every couple of weeks, from people saying "Hey I read in the New York Times that you passed a "tooth-fairy bill." -- It was some legislator or legislative staff or some advocacy group – "will you send me a copy of the bill?" And I did that with the lifeline bill, with the tooth fairy bill, I did that with capital gains. I think I sent Act 250. And then after doing that for a couple of months, I started to sort of say, "Gee, do you have any bills that you've been working on or have thought about because I could use them here in Vermont." And so people started to do that. And I don't know how, but I think the first person I talked to about this was Derek Shearer. I think I visited him in California.

PC: Where did you run into him?

LW: I ran into him in Washington. He was sort of a journalist. .. I don't know, maybe it was in Boston... I ran into him in Washington, got to know him in Washington, just a bit. I don't know what drew us together when I was in Vermont, but I remember visiting him a couple of times at the Boston Phoenix. He was there for two or three years... And I was also connected to Washington through the Institute for Policy Studies. I don't know where the idea came from, and I don't know the actual progression here. But I remember sitting in my office in Vermont, sitting down and writing a proposal to a foundation – which I think is up there [in my attic] somewhere...and sending it to Arch Gillies and David Hunter, and two or three other foundations. And Arch Gillies called me back a week or two later and said "I think it's a great idea. I'm going to give you ten thousand dollars."

And then David Hunter called and said, “Will you come down and speak to the Stern Family Board in New Orleans, and then a couple of weeks later I got a call from him saying I got \$35,000 from them; and then I got a call two weeks later saying I had gotten \$20 or 30 or 40 thousand from Mary Ann Mott-Benet; and then five or ten thousand dollars from the Ottinger Foundation. So there I was sitting on \$110 or 120 thousand dollars, or some number like that, which was an enormous amount of money at that time. And I decided to put it through the Institute of Policy Studies. I think I was on the Board of the Institute for Policy Studies – I don’t know whether that came before or after. And Barbara Bick, who -- I can’t remember whether the Madison conference preceded getting the money or not – was at the Institute as a volunteer doing administrative work – she’d been very active in Women’s Strike for Peace – she was older, probably in her late 50s early 60s, you know a lot of capacity for work, a very hard working person. And she then was doing this for 6-8 months, being paid something, and she really wanted to find another staff person. And she hired . . . Ann Beaudry. And so Ann was working for Barbara, and I was the director.

And then I decided to move to Washington, for two or three reasons. This was late 76 or 77. One, I really didn’t like teaching. And I really enjoyed Montpelier. I liked the legislative process. And I think I had just won the Democratic nomination for state senate. I was very involved with local politics. And then I discovered what the pay was for state senator in Vermont. . . . So that’s how I ended up in Washington, and at that time the Conference was a Project of the Institute for Policy Studies. Because of my origins – Barbara had never done anything in state and local government – I really emphasized publications.

And particularly Derek. Derek and I – and I think Derek was as active in recruiting things from other states, legislators and so on, as I was. And so we did these public policy readers, which were really assemblies of other things that people had done: whether they were memos from legislative staffers, or articles, or copies of legislation, or surveys of legislation on a particular subject. And I think we also agreed that we wanted to have lots of conferences. And so we encouraged – every time we thought there was a small critical mass of people in a particular region, we would encourage them to have a regional conference. Which we would provide money to, and either we would do the publication or we would encourage them to do a publication. Very few of these regional publications, to my disappointment, ever really produced as much material as what Derek and I were able to do for these annual public policy readers. They tended to be shorter – thirty or forty pages, three or four articles and a clipping file. I was finding the Institute for Policy Studies to be increasingly a difficult place to work, because they were taking – not too much, maybe ten percent – but because people coming into the Institute were primarily interested in the Third World. Unlike say Dick Barnett and Marcus Raskin, who were interested primarily in domestic policy. There were other people now coming in who were really primarily interested in Latin America. And eventually we separated from the Institute. . . . It wasn’t a sympathetic place, didn’t provide any real services.

PC: The last national conference was in Pittsburgh, the last national conference. I went to that one...

Do you have a sense of peaks and valleys in the Conference. It seems that in the natural course of things, when you first get started, four foundation people say hey this is a great idea, you get started, the sky is the limit – you don't know where it's going to go, but the trajectory is up. Was there a fork in the road at some point after that, where you took it in a different direction?

LW: Well the money that we got originally was – “Hey Lee, here's money for your plan.” In a sense it was general support. And there was no staff to speak of, and there were no expenses, and so we had enormous latitude as to what you could do with the money. After that, -- and I don't know whether this was at a particular date or not – you had to recognize that you had to go out to a wider group of foundations, who had narrower agendas. So you will see more and more publications, which represent funding. More and more publications on specific subject areas. So we got a good deal of funding for agriculture, for the environment. We never got a lot of funding for what Derek would call economic democracy. But that was always an interest of mine and Derek's, and we always would try to find a way to do those anyway.

At one point we had maybe four or five departments of the Conference. There was a women's program, there was a agriculture program, there was an environmental program, there was an economic development or economic democracy program. And as you know we had a very large publications program. And I continued to probably invest more money and energy into the publications, as a way of expanding our reach.

PC: Did you make money on the publications?

LW: Probably not. If you thought of it as – we got grants for the publications that paid for the printing of the publications, and if you ask were we making money on our inventory, the answer is definitely yes. But it really was the grants that made the publications worthwhile.

PC: Was there a period when people were winning office, and a sense of achievement because of this?

LW: Oh, yes. I certainly didn't feel at any point that we had reached a significant high point, where lots of people had won. People would run, and they would win or lose. But then you hear about five new people that appeared in Iowa, or six new people in Colorado. It was as much of a process of discovery, as it was of working with the people that you started to work with in the first place.

We didn't do – called the Euclid Group. And I don't remember when this was – it probably was 74 or 75 – where I brought together Heather Booth, Ira Arlook and a bunch of other people to try to initiate a major effort throughout the country to get people to run for state and local office. And Heather and Ira and others who I was working with on this,

eventually decided that what they wanted to do was to work closely with the AFL-CIO. And the group ultimately dissolved before we did anything, and they wound up trying to create alliances between Citizen Action organization and the state AFL-CIO and other union organizations, in which local activists and others would be trained for citizen action kinds of organizations. And I had been pushing and trying to move in the direction of a major effort to – you know, how many cities are there in Massachusetts, how many city council seats, let's go out and find three people in every city. Let's get thousands of people to run.

And they did carry through with their strategy. But I know there's this box upstairs on the Euclid Group that is just filled with correspondence.

PC: They weren't against running for office?

LW: No. They were less interested in policy, and more interested in politics, in the sense of citizen politics. I continued to be a person who was fascinated with crafting legislation, and crafting legislation that by its provisions and elements, could create the coalitions that you needed to have to create a progressive organization. I could go into a lengthy discussion of all of the provisions that we had in our tooth fairy bill, or in our utility bill, or capital gains tax bill – that was aimed at focusing on certain issues, picking up all of the potential elements, to try to provide the widest scope of benefits for people, try to make it an economic issue, not a social issue or a class issue or anything else like that, and to try to create something with which you could make the argument that seventy, eighty, ninety percent of the people in the state or the city are going to benefit, and 10 or 15 percent wouldn't benefit. And I always liked – frustrating thing to me about the conference – I always liked to spend a lot of time working on legislation. I thought it was the most creative thing that you could possibly do. And I found myself instead out raising money, managing – It was fine, but I wished I could you know – have spent three days in Minnesota working on a tax reform bill.

PC: The legislative director was Beaudry.

LW: When Barbara left she became an associate director. She was really the person who worked on networking. She really cared about the national conferences, and the regional conferences. She really believed in networks. And threw her heart and soul into it. I tended to do the fund raising, run the executive committee, publications, and – with Ann – the overall strategy. She and I disagreed a lot. I wanted to move the organization in a more policy directed way, and to focus more on getting particular pieces of legislation passed in legislatures and city councils, that would serve as national examples. And, I was very interested in encouraging people to run for office. The focus being on state and city government. Ann's interest was I think much more so creating networks of activists and legislators, candidates and others and seeing in that those networks, coalitions, personal connections the real motive force of progressive politics.

No question she – worked on the tax reform, worked on the women's book, she was very interested in policy stuff too. But her focus was – I think we would often times argue

about the national conferences, and her wanting to put lots of resources into the national conferences, have lots of activists, have all of the most interesting people there and me, I did more let's – I wanted to go out and spend time with Byron Dorgan and Kent Conrad. There were other people that wanted Marion Barry or Carol Bellamy to speak. Me, maybe because of Vermont, thinking we had to get out from under the New York City, big city view of the world. I had to be much more relevant to the majority of the states. That is one reason why I think I focused on tax policy, farm policy, economic development policy. I did tend to be probably more state oriented than city oriented.

PC: In one of the Newsletters there was a report on a meeting in California, that had 800 people in Oakland, 1977. And you spoke there and said you had taken a trip through the country, trying to find people to be part of this thing.

LW: Oh that's right. That was one of the things – I think I did it in five or six places – that I used that money for.

PC: I was wondering who you found, who were the first people, the most useful people?

LW: Paul Soglin and Jim Rowen in Madison. Perry Bullard, was from Ann Arbor I think. There were a couple of state legislators in Minnesota, St. Paul.

PC: Where did you go on the trip?

LW: I think I also went to Denver, and saw Sam Brown. Sam Brown was the treasurer by then. And I think I got out to California; I may have gotten to North Dakota.

PC: Did you connect with the Mass Fair Share people?

LW: Oh yes. But we did not have a lot of legislators from Boston heavily involved. Fair Share people like Mike Ansara we knew each other from way back.

I don't know how he got involved, but David Smith was involved very early. And he was very good friends with Mel King. And I don't know the connection, but through him I think we met John Alschuler and through him, Nick Carbone.

I don't understand David's relationship with John, I don't know how that started. Funny I saw them about two years ago at a Theatre in New York, they are still close friends. But I don't know what the connection was. And I think there were a couple of legislators from New York, Manhattan. Progressive liberal democrats.

PC: Ruth Messinger?

LW. Yes. Although she wasn't there earlier.

I don't remember anybody from Philadelphia.

All the conferences seemed like, they were all the same, in some way, shape or form. . . I felt that we were putting far too many resources into the national conferences. Time. And – here’s a big reason. Every time we would do a national conference, we would try to get press coverage. And we always got press coverage, and it was always the same article: “Former new leftists meet in xxxx” That drove me nuts. Because I was trying to establish the organization more as a place for a new generation of activists, and to build around more policy – thinking back to my frustrations at SDS as the strategy got consumed by the militants – that was built more on policy, and had roots in real people with constituencies. And more and more I felt that the national conferences became gatherings for activists, not public officials. And I think that is something that did occur over that period of time. The conferences became very important for activists to get together, with some legislators; and not places for legislators, council members and officials. So – I had mentioned to you before that Ann and I had these disagreements about the conferences. But I did not realize that I had won, so early. And that period of time had been a long time.

Five national conferences. Two of them must have been when I was in Vermont. Three of them when I was in New York.

I was consumed by fund raising. I had to spend a lot of time on that,. And had to spend a lot of time positioning the Conference on various issues such that we could take advantage of new trends that developed in the foundation and the funding world. And I focused on what are some things that we could do that would make money. Some grants that we got, we made money.

PC: What were these trends?

LW: Environment. Anti-nuclear. Agriculture.

PC: Wasn’t the Reagan election a pretty big change?

LW: Not .. It certainly was in the context. But it didn’t have a big effect on us. It was a little bit more easy for me to make my argument about state and local as the focus, but it didn’t affect the organization very much.